

AUTHOR OF ST. OLAVE'S













LADY LOWATER'S COMPANION.

VOL. I.

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LADY LOWATER'S COMPANION

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"ST. OLAVE'S," "JANITA'S CROSS," "ANNETTE,"
"THE SENIOR SONGMAN,"
&c., &c.

'This is the condition of the battle, which man that is born upon the earth shall fight; that if he be overcome, he shall suffer.'—Esdras.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
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LADY LOWATER'S COMPANION.

CHAPTER I.

Lowater Court stood on rising ground, a mile or two away from the coast; massive, broad-shouldered, low-browed, firmly planted to hold its own against the storms which in autumn-time came driving up from seaward. Whoever built that house had built it for use, only for use. Neither pillar, pediment, nor gable broke the outline of its solid front, which had now stood the chance and change of five centuries. Not a fragment of sculptured leaf or Vol. I.

flower adorned the mullions and transoms of its windows. Not so much as a bit of cornice could be seen upon the square stacks of chimneys along its roof ridge, nor did the smallest hint of battlemented parapet make an outlet for the winds to scream through, when in winter their rough music roused all the country round. Lowater Court was builded together like the frames of some of the olden knights, who in days gone by had stood at its gates and battled for its safety, to be a sure guard and a strong resting-place, but not to be admired either for its beauty or its grace.

Nature, however, had given it what man's hand had forgotten, touching it with lichens of softest grey and gold where the land wind from the great barren moors to the north blew upon it, making it green with ivy and vine where the summer sun kissed it at noon-time. Out of the crevices of its rough stone walls grew tiny ferns, as dainty and delicate as though a lady's hand had planted and a lady's love had tended them. Where they could not find room, the greener mosses grew, blooming out into myriad little crimson cups, which, catching the sunlight, held it there for the cheering of the else so desolate place. For it seemed as though these things loved it the more, the more it was forsaken of man's loving kindness.

Around it stood its guardian elm-trees, ready for shadow or shelter, as sun or storm might come. In winter the low red morning sunlight struck through their leafless branches, and glowed upon the deep-set windows of the east front, and turned to diamond and ruby the hoar frost upon the mosses. Later on one saw the rooks stirring busily amongst those

same leafless branches, their every croak heard in the dead stillness which seemed to belong to the place. And so still it was, so little vexed by human interruption, that the rabbits nibbled the grass under the terrace windows, and birds built their nests in the balustrades of that terrace, and wood-pigeons, those flyers from the haunts of men, came night by night to tell their story in the yew-trees by the terrace steps, well knowing that none would disturb them there. For indeed, their love-talk was the only talk of that kind which the yew-trees ever heard now.

Lady Lowater and her companion Miss Pentwistle lived at Lowater Court, and they lived as dull a life there as their worst enemy need have wished. In the morning Miss Pentwistle gave her ladyship's orders to the housekeeper, and

looked at the accounts, and dusted the rare old china in the faded drawing-room, and made visits, accompanied by tracts, to the poor people of the neighbourhood After luncheon she and Lady Lowater slept, at least Miss Pentwistle slept, and my lady seemed to do so. When the nap was over, both ladies took a stroll in the grounds, came in for afternoon tea, dressed for dinner, partook of that meal solemnly in presence of the old family butler, and the equally old family footman, returned to the drawing-room, respectively took and appeared to take another nap, roused up for coffee, trifled with some fancy work, had prayers, all the servants sitting in a row at the end of the room, and then went to bed. With this scheme of living Miss Pentwistle was quite content. If my lady was not, she never said anything about being otherwise.

In former years this routine had been broken in upon from time to time by a raid from Lady Lowater's only child, Sir Merrion, then knocking about the country with his regiment, the —th. When he came of age and might have settled down on the property, he still preferred remaining in the army, finding life at Lowater Court a somewhat tedious affair, and not meeting in any of the dull little country towns where the —th was quartered, any young lady who moved him to thoughts of matrimony. So long as the Lowater game was well preserved, and so long as his regiment was in a good hunting district, and so long as he could get his fill of athletic sports in the barrack-grounds, Merrion Lowater was as really content with his roving life as his mother only appeared to be with her stagnant one.

But now he was with his regiment on

foreign service and had been so for a couple of years, during which time no festivities worthy of the name had taken place at Lowater Court. Of course there were in the neighbourhood people of the upper-middle class who had to be called upon from time to time, and entertained once a year or so at a garden-party; and there were also people of more exalted station, belonging in a not remote degree to dukes and earls, and the carriages of these people cut up the terrace gravel now and then when a state dinner-party was given at Lowater Court, or the duty call consequent upon such dinner-party had to be made.

For, spite of her recluse habits, my lady was a lady of rank, and whoever married that only son of hers would be a lady of rank too, with a good position in the county and a tidy income. Indeed,

the income would be all the better for the strict economy which was practised upon the estate during the young baronet's absence. And then, if report said true, he was not a man who made away with his patrimony by any illegitimate means. Hunting, shooting, cricketing, all sorts of athletic sports were his delight. He was a good officer, a brave soldier, an honest English gentleman; just the sort a vigilant mother might wish her daughter to settle down with, even though his abilities were not of the kind which would ever leave a mark upon his country's history. Therefore the county people kept on being polite to my Lady Lowater, feeble as was the encouragement which she gave to their attention.

'Miss Pentwistle, the world is hollow as a drum.'

That was what her ladyship said one

evening after the Lady Belleray and Mr. and Lady Maud Dollingbroke had been dining at the Court. Lady Belleray had three grown-up daughters, and Mr. Dollingbroke, of Lupus Court, five miles away, even more. And Lady Belleray had heard that the —th was under orders for home. Or was it only that Sir Merrion was thinking of taking furlough?

'Miss Pentwistle, the world is as hollow as a drum.'

'The world is as Providence made it, Lady Lowater. We must not complain.'

My lady laughed a little, bitter laugh, just enough to set the diamonds in her necklace alight.

'It is nothing of the sort, Miss Pentwistle. It is what wicked people have made it. Don't tell me that Providence has anything to do with the sin and misery, the picking and stealing, and haggling and contriving, that are going on all around us. One had better not have a Providence, then, if that is all it can do for us.'

'Oh, dear, I beg your pardon,' replied Miss Pentwistle, anxious to keep in both with Providence and Lady Lowater. 'I did not understand you to refer to sin and misery or anything of that sort. I thought you were only referring to society at large.'

'And pray what is society at large but sin and misery?' said my lady, with another flicker of the diamonds.

'My dear Lady Lowater, try to cultivate a more resigned spirit. In this state of probation we must have our trials.'

'I don't know anything about probation, Miss Pentwistle. I only know that society is hollow, and we are hollow along with it, you and I and all of us, as hollow as ever we can be. If we do speak the truth sometimes, it is by accident, and as often as not we have to suffer for speaking it.'

Miss Pentwistle did not rebel. My lady was evidently getting ready for a bilious attack, and at such times society did naturally appear hollow. She had known clergymen, under similar circumstances, reflect in the pulpit, with a sort of subdued satisfaction, upon the very small proportion of human beings who could be expected to escape eternal perdition; though, when the attack had worked off, these same clergymen were amongst the most benevolent of men. One had to make allowances for physical conditions. Was the dandelion coffee running short? Was there a good supply of taraxacum pills in the medicine chest? Had the cook been sending up dishes less carefully prepared than usual? These questions, rather than others of a more strictly ethical nature, were to

be taken into consideration when people began to talk too gloomily about sin and misery and that sort of thing. At the same time, one must admit the existence of evil, and be in a sort of cheerful, external way sorry for it. All religious people had to be that.

Lady Lowater looked round for the white chuddah which usually lay over the back of her chair. Miss Pentwistle was up in a moment, folded it comfortably round her, so that the diamonds could not assert their sympathy with my lady's opinions.

'I don't wonder you shiver. It is really very chilly to-night.'

'Chilly? It is enough to freeze the crickets on the hearth. And Lady Maud and the girls not half through that five miles' ride! Poor things! If she did but know that Merrion does not mean to marry for this ten years! But, you see, as I said

before, one does not speak the truth, or only by accident.'

'But he does talk about coming home on furlough, Lady Lowater.'

'That is quite a different thing from marrying. I think I will not stay up for prayers to-night, Miss Pentwistle.'

'Certainly. It is, as you say, very cold.'
Lady Lowater shivered again. She was
a tall, thin, haggard woman, a convenient
object for the frost to penetrate.

'I should think the very polecats in the plantation must feel it. And perhaps I shall not come down for prayers to-morrow morning either, Miss Pentwistle. Somehow I am not in tune for the General Thanksgiving.'

Truly one might have desired a better illustration of gratitude than the mistress of Lowater Court, as she stood there, cold, hard, bitter, but so handsome still in her middle-aged stateliness, gathering up her bits of fripperies, laced handkerchief, smelling-bottle, feather-screen, before going to her own room at the far end of the long corridor, where the frost, spite of blazing fire and furred dressing-gown, would bite her just as keenly, no warmth being in the withered heart to keep it out. But Miss Pentwistle only replied, briskly and cheerfully as ever,

'You are quite right, Lady Lowater. If I were you I should remain in bed for breakfast, until the weather takes a turn. These downstairs rooms are very chilly in the early morning.'

'They are always chilly to me, Miss Pentwistle,' said my lady, with a frosty sigh. 'Good-night.'

CHAPTER II.

There was no village, strictly speaking, of Lowater, only a cluster or two of cottages, occupied for the most part by labourers employed upon the estate. There had once been a village, and a good sized one too, but it had gradually slipped down to the coast a couple of miles away, where the little river Scar, if river it could be called which was scarcely more than a brook at its widest part, ran out into the sea. Here for many a year there had been a colony of fishermen, who had supported themselves and their families by

selling herrings and crabs in Byborough, the nearest large town to Lowater, content if they could scrape together an honest living and clothe themselves decently enough to present a respectable appearance in Lowater Church, towards which Sunday by Sunday, along the narrow high-banked lanes, thick fringed with fern and ivy, one might see them labouring with the uneasy gait of men to whom land of any kind is only a temporary accommodation.

But a traveller chanced to find out the quiet little cove, and told others of its beauty, and how the north wind was tempered there, and how in early spring, when the high lands were nipped and frozen, there was comfort to be found under the red cliffs at Scarmouth. And after that stray invalids found their way to the fishermen's cottages, and the good report of the

place spread, and enterprising contractors ran up lodging houses, and retired people from Byborough built villas there; and the end of it was that, just fifty years from the time when the traveller found out the place, Scarmouth was a regular sea-side resort, much to the detriment of Lowater, to whose gaunt stone-built cottages, moss-crusted with damp and worn with the biting of the north wind, none of the neighbouring townspeople now cared to come.

Scarmouth did not belong to the Lowater estate, but to the Countess Muchmarch, who held it in her own right, and who lived at a pretty place called the Cliffs, bordering on Lady Lowater's property. The countess was a wise woman, or at any rate her agent was wise for her; and, when she saw that her little fishing village was getting up in the world, she laid out a promenade on the beach, and built a bijou hotel and a bijou church, and a row of pretty lodging houses facing the sea, and in various other ways popularised the place, with this good result to herself, that her rent-roll was doubling itself every ten years, whilst Lady Lowater's was moving in quite an opposite direction; so opposite indeed that the shooting had to be let now, a thing which had not been done on the Lowater moors since guns were invented. But as Mr. Antony, the Lowater man of business, said, her ladyship's income must be kept up somehow. And during the young baronet's absence, her ladyship, though the most independent of women, had to give up everything to Mr. Antony.

But though, for all practical and profitable purposes, the village of Lowater had betaken itself to the seaside, and was there carrying on business under the name of Scarmouth, the ancient cluster of cottages still held together on the high land, and the little old church, the mother-church of the parish, stood in their midst as aforetime, grey, weather-beaten, keeping guard over the mouldering dust of the Lowaters within its chancel, and the lonely graves of those who had served the great people, as in olden times great people were served, silently, faithfully, and now lay under their headstones, meek, uncomplaining in death as they had been in life.

Those who had done the service lay out in the cold. Those who had taken it slept amongst painted windows and sculptured marble, their good deeds all well set forth over them, to be praised in this world if not otherwhere.

For indeed it seemed as if that little church on the hill-top had been dedicated

less to the worship of God than to the honour and glory of the Lowaters, with such multiplication of sentences in Latin and English, beneath stained glass and on monumental brass, and round marble effigy, was their memorial set forth. Lady Lowater, going to church on Sunday mornings, might well be proud of the noble family into which she had married. The Court pew itself was a chantry built for the repose of the soul of a long ago dead Lowater knight. It was on the north side of the chancel, well away from the humbler worshippers. On one side an open archway gave its occupants a sight of the choir and altar. From the second they could, if they liked, look down the north aisle of the church, where in high oaken pews the Court servants, men and maidens, were ranged. Old Sir Guy, the late baronet, had always sat where he could

have a full prospect of that aisle, in order, some people said, that he might keep the serving-men in better order, they being given to slumber, except for fear of awful glances from beneath their master's shaggy eyebrows. Others said, though they only said it amongst themselves, that the woodman's daughter Libbie was the prettiest girl in the village, and Libbie had gone to be kitchenmaid at the Court, and Sir Guy knew a pretty face when he saw it as well as anyone, even though it might be a different style of beauty from my lady's.

My lady used to sit there too, by his side. But, when he removed to the rest of the Lowaters under the chancel stones, she too removed, and sat, with her back to the people, in a niche quite up in the corner of the pew, where she could see nobody but one or two of the choristers. Over the niche was a figure of St. Peter

with his keys, looking fierce and inexorable as though he had just locked some evil-doer out of the kingdom of heaven. My lady liked that seat because no one could see how much or how little she was attending to the service. By turning her head a mere inch or two on one side, so that it rested comfortably against the pillar which supported the niche canopy, she completely lost sight of the pulpit, and the pulpit's occupant as completely lost sight of her. Only Ben Dyson her woodman, and the best bass in the choir, commanded a prospect of her from his seat by the little vestry door, and Ben generally slept during the sermon, so that his observation, she thought, did not count for much.

So she would sit with closed eyes, not at all slumbering eyes, though, sometimes listening to the Reverend Stephen Rock's sermon, sometimes not listening to it. Or,

rousing herself from some long train of thought, she would watch the rich mantles of purple and crimson which the sun, slowly mounting to its meridian, flung through the stained windows upon the stony Lowater knights in the chancel, from Sir Peveril of the third Edward's time, a headless trunk now kneeling at his ineffectual prayers under an emblazoned canopy, onward past many a dame and damsel, to the latest baronet, whose deathbed she, his wife, had watched, and whose effigy in marble reposed under the south window of the chancel, a brass just beneath it setting forth his styles and titles, and how well he had fulfilled his duties as magistrate, high sheriff, and lieutenant of his native county. But not setting forth at all, which indeed was prudent, how he had fulfilled his duties as a husband.

Next to Sir Guy's effigy was another

window, a small double lancet, with a carved stone mullion between the lights. One of these lancets was filled in with diaper work of rich stained glass, brought by some Lowater connoisseur from Munich. The other light was of thirteenth century English work, and represented the angel with drawn sword guarding the gate of Eden. This figure chanced to be so placed that at noon-time, when Mr. Rock was drawing to the close of his always short homilies, the sunlight flashing through its eyes smote upon Lady Lowater's face as she sat under St. Peter's niche in the chantry pew, herself moveless and stony as any statue. And at the same time the light from the drawn sword which the angel held, streamed across upon St. Peter with his keys, bringing out into stronger relief the expression of stern rebuke and authority upon his face. Indeed, as Miss Pentwistle said, he seemed to be perpetually passing judgment upon whoever sat beneath him, and turning them out of heaven with his frown, just as the angel was warning them from Eden with its sword. And she wondered Lady Lowater did not change her seat, especially as the sun must be so very dazzling when it glanced directly upon her face. But my lady would not move so much as an inch.

'One does not get too much sunlight in this world,' she said, carelessly, and that was all she said to Miss Pentwistle.

But to herself she said differently.

'Keeping the gate of the garden of Eden,' was her thought, as the day-beam, flashing through the angel's eyes, smote upon her worn face. 'Let him smite me so. I have done evil. There is no garden of Eden for me henceforth.'

CHAPTER III.

Since the building of Lady Muchmarch's pretty little ecclesiastical edifice at Scarmouth, and the establishment of an equally pretty little incumbent there, the few people who gathered in the old parish church at Lowater were scarcely worth the name of a congregation. That might be the fault of the clergyman, who had not what is called popular pulpit talent. And again that deficiency might be the fault of the stipend, for what pulpit talent of any kind, to say nothing of the fashionable popular kind, could be expected for ninety-

seven pounds ten a year, with a cottage to live in? And that was the limit fixed by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to the income of Mr. Rock, perpetual curate of St. Andrew's Church, Lowater, and a man already well on to fifty years of age.

A quiet, inoffensive man, as, indeed, any man of fifty with ninety-seven pounds ten a year had good cause to be. Miss Pentwistle herself, though not so old within a year or two, and not a scholar of Clare either, was making a better living for herself; for besides the round hundred which she received annually for spending her life at Lowater Court, she had board and lodging, and freedom to do pretty much as she pleased, Lady Lowater being a person who never interfered with anyone so long as she herself was let alone. A man, too, who would never get on in the Church, come what might, for he had no 'views'—

none, at least, that you could take hold of as locating him definitely in the basement, or middle floors, or attic of the Establishment. As Miss Pentwistle, who had a fine scent for doctrine, observed, to hear a bit of one sermon you might think him an Evangelical pure and simple; to hear another bit, you might swear, if such a thing were proper, that he belonged to the most advanced corps of the Ritualists; and to hear the winding up of a third, you would be justified in describing him as a mischievous latitudinarian.

What could such a man expect then, other than empty pews and a perpetual curacy at ninety-seven pounds a year? No bishop would have anything to do with him. No patron would ever care to put him into a vicarage. Miss Pentwistle herself would have gone to Scarmouth church long ago, where the service, though a trifle

high, was more lively, had it not been that at St. Asaph's under Mr. Moberly she must have taken a hard, high-backed chair anywhere amongst lodging-house keepers and fishermen, and in her own parish church she was free of the Lowater pew with its amplitude of space, and its wealth of musty velvet cushions, and its conveniences for repose when the sermon was too uninteresting, to say nothing of a certain social dignity which one could not help feeling when in the occupation of That was really, and she confessed it. it, the chief reason which kept her at St. Andrew's.

And therefore when the lady gossips of Scarmouth ventured upon a few little hints as to the advisability of a coalition between the curate and the companion, Miss Pentwistle only gave a shrug of disdain, as different as possible from the becoming consciousness which overspread her countenance when the possibility of anything of the kind with regard to Mr. Antony was suggested. In fact Mr. Antony, when he was a very poor man, had dared to cherish hopes in the direction of Lady Lowater's companion, then a fair-haired, self-possessed person of four-and-twenty; but the hopes had not found sufficient encouragement to warrant any steps on his part towards turning them into realities. Now, had he cherished them, Miss Pentwistle would not have discouraged them so much. The question was, did he cherish them?

Not that Miss Pentwistle troubled herself about the matter. She was far too matter-of-fact for that. With a comfortable home and a clear income of a hundred a year, out of which, Lady Lowater being generous in the matter of presents, she had, since her residence at the Court. saved a thousand pounds, she did not feel that, taking into account her own little independency of about five-and-twenty pounds a year, she need bring herself into bondage to any man. If anything did happen to Lady Lowater, she had good reason to think that her name would not be omitted in the will amongst other handsome annuities. Or if Sir Merrion married and his mother had to live in the dower-house on the confines of the estate. now occupied by Mrs. Tallington, the dowager Lady Lowater would still require a companion, so that her position, if not quite so exalted, would be comfortable enough. About marriage, therefore, unless it brought her much gain, she need not trouble herself.

At the same time she had now and then occupied such imagination as was possible

to her, in building castles in the air which took the shape of Mr. Antony's elegant villa on the Byborough Road, with herself as its mistress, Mr. Antony being a necessary adjunct to the possession of the property. And it was the pleasantness of such a prospect, joined with the value of the settlements which would of course be be made upon her in the event of such a union, which caused almost a blush to overspread Miss Pentwistle's cheek, when Mrs. Petipase, the doctor's wife of Scarmouth, ventured upon her little pleasantries in a matrimonial direction. But when they had reference to the Reverend Stephen Rock, with that starvation-point income of his—pshaw!

Lady Lowater, too, cared but little for the perpetual curate. But that little was not because she despised him, as Miss Pentwistle did. On the contrary, she was

a clever enough woman to know that, if he chose to put out his strength, he could master them both. About his views on church matters, or whether he had any at all, she in no wise troubled herself. But she was obliged to trouble herself sometimes about the discernment with which he could penetrate the crust of appearances, both social and religious. She kept up none of the latter, except so far as custom had made them necessary for a lady in her position, and therefore she could listen with more than comfort, with interest and amusement, whilst Miss Pentwistle's little theological outworks were one by one swept away, and the very citadel of her spiritual pride and prejudice was made to tremble before the battering-ram of his common-sense. She would have done as much herself, if it had only been worth the trouble. Miss

Pentwistle's religion was an entirely mechanical one. Take out a peg or two here and there, and the whole thing came to pieces, with the result that in half-anhour it was built up again in exactly the same form, and as entirely as ever to its owner's satisfaction. Indeed, that was why she never cared to meddle with it. If it had been a living plant, which one could have cut down to its roots, and salted with salt, there would have been more satisfaction in the destroying process.

But Mr. Rock could look through other things than religious appearances. She felt, with a consciousness often more vivid than comforting, that he could look through the folds of social courtesy to the rottenness, nay, foulness, which they covered. Could he also look through to the pain, to the yearning, to the repentance? His eyes, as he stood in the old,

black-oak pulpit of Lowater Church, darting with quiet scorn his arrows against the hypocrisies of modern life, lowly and lofty, had often appeared to her as searching as those of the angel with the drawn sword who kept the gate of the Garden of Eden. Nay more, for fling your own weak imaginations away, and it was only a passing gleam of sunlight which smote upon her from the robed figure always standing between herself and her husband's grave, whereas it was a living soul looking into hers when Mr. Rock talked on in that fearless way. Popular pulpit talent! Would he had had it, and plenty of it too; for one could listen to that comfortably enough. It was the unpopular talent, the talent which could rive off all cloaks and wrappings of convenience, and show the sinful human heart for what it really was, that Mr. Rock

possessed, and that kept him there, to bring her sins to her remembrance, whether or not he knew them for what they were.

So from time to time she would go to St. Asaph's, where the ministrations were not of such a searching kind. Mr. Moberly did the service sweetly, in a voice which was the envy of the clergymen far and near; and then he read a neat little religious essay, and the congregation dispersed, pleased both with its incumbent and itself. And always, within a day or two of her attendance at the fashionable new church, Mr. Moberly himself would call upon her, such an attention being the least he could show to a lady of rank who had left her own parish for the sake of listening to his superior eloquence. And he would chat pleasantly about the latest new book, or the new rules for croquet, or the amateur theatricals which were being got up to provide new vestments for the choristers; and my lady never felt that he was observing her too closely, that her customary wrappings of good-breeding and courtesy had any thin place through which he could look to the misery underneath.

That was the best way. And Mr. Rock never seemed vexed, either, never by hint or question or remark of any kind let her see that her absence was noticed. What he had to say was the important thing, not the number nor quality of the people to whom he said it. And if next day, driving with Miss Pentwistle in the hand-somely appointed old family carriage, she met the curate on his round amongst the labourers' cottages, his greeting was as kindly and simple as though my lady had never been absent from her place. It was

not such as she who had power to vex him. And Lady Lowater had nobility enough to be glad that it was so.

CHAPTER IV.

Miss Pentwistle often did Lady Lowater's calls for her, amongst those who did not strictly belong to the county people. To the mansions of these latter her ladyship always tried to go upon exceptionally fine afternoons coming after long spells of rain, or when a flower-show was going on at Byborough, or when the bishop's wife was having one of her great garden-parties. There was hope then that the people would be out, and to receive a 'not-at-home' from as many footmen as might be, was all Lady Lowater desired.

Not so Miss Pentwistle when the second class of calls had to be made. Life at the Court was comfortable enough, and for herself very independent; but there was no denying its tediousness. To vary it by a breeze of gossip from without was sometimes necessary. And there were pleasant people down at Scarmouth who knew all about what was going on, what engagements had been made, what others broken, who was the last young lady that report had set down as Mr. Moberly's future wife, the matrimonial prospects of the new curate, the shortcomings of Mrs. Pontifex, the extravagant and fascinating little wife of the colonel of the regiment then stationed at Byborough, the flirtations that were in process at the spa promenade concerts, the amount of debt into which Lady Belleray's married daughter had contrived to plunge her husband, and

various other topics interesting to people like Miss Pentwistle, scant of internal resources.

Then, too, she generally picked up something which helped to keep conversation going during the long winter evenings. As a rule, her ladyship did not care for being read to,—at any rate not when the reading was of Miss Pentwistle's favourite sort. And she was a most unsatisfactory sleeper after dinner; in fact Miss Pentwistle had her doubts whether it was sleep at all, or only the pretence of it, which allowed the jewelled hands to fidget so, and the breath to come in long-drawn sighs, almost groans sometimes, during that fifteen minutes before the coffee came in. Indigestion, most likely, producing lowness of spirits and flightiness of temper, too; and in that case a little cheerful conversation about other people's affairs

was the best possible corrective. Miss Pentwistle, therefore, was always provided with something of the kind, just as, when the attack became sharper still, she had recourse to the supply of taraxacum in her medicine-chest.

'The usual beat, I suppose,' said Lady Lowater, wearily, one February afternoon, when Miss Pentwistle, after foraging for gossip in Scarmouth, had returned in time to accompany her ladyship on her little stroll through the grounds before tea. 'The usual beat, I suppose, through the plantations and up to the rock seat, and home by the game-coops.'

'I don't think we can go a better way,' said Miss Pentwistle.

She did not tire of routine, any more than the snuff-box which does its round of tunes when it is properly wound up. Indeed, routine was her native air, in it she breathed most freely.

My lady gave a little sigh, but said nothing. She looked very stately as she stood there in the hall doorway, her rich furs and wrappings sweeping about her, stately as any of the Lowater ladies who had moved amongst their old family portraits in generations past. Only there was such a hunted, restless look in her eves, the look of a creature which is always watching for its life amongst enemies. Miss Pentwistle set it down to ill-health, as she did also the general want of cheerfulness in Lady Lowater's demeanour. It might, too, result from want of religious feeling. When people were able to trust in Providence it made a great difference.

'Let us start then, and the sooner we get it over the better. Stay, though, Miss

Pentwistle, I must have Tiny and Trip.'

And Lady Lowater lifted from the chain at her girdle a little silver pencil case, which had a whistle at the end of it, and with this she was going to call up the dogs when her companion stopped her.

'The traps, Lady Lowater.'

'Oh! no, there are no traps now. Jefferson had my orders to take them all up last week. I told him I would not suffer them about the place, after we saw that wretched cat in one of them with its paw half eaten off.'

'Horrible!' said Miss Pentwistle. 'I remember it perfectly well. But all I can say is, that the traps were there yesterday when I went through the north spinney on my way to the village. I think Jefferson told me it was Mr. Antony who had ordered him to put them down again, as the vermin interfered with the game.'

Lady Lowater said nothing, but when she dropped the little pencil-case there were the marks of her teeth upon it, far into the silver. And with even a prouder step than usual she went across the terrace towards the plantation.

'Temper,' thought Miss Pentwistle.

Indeed, she knew very well, when she mentioned Mr. Antony's name in that way, that it would rouse her ladyship's temper. A day or two ago she would not so have mentioned it, but that afternoon she had heard something at Scarmouth which made her not quite so anxious to keep Mr. Antony in favour at the Court. Indeed, if Miss Pentwistle had been in a position to do just as she liked, she would have shown her own temper a little, as Lady Lowater was showing hers just now; but she was far too wise a woman to show temper at all, unless she stood upon inde-

pendent ground, and could accompany the temper with something definitely authoritative in the way of disagreeableness. Thank goodness, if anything vexed her she could keep it to herself. At the same time, if Lady Lowater did not want to talk, she could be silent. It made no difference.

And so they walked on side by side, neither speaking a word, past the deserted looking croquet-ground and archery courts, and the clumps of sentinel elm-trees just beginning to thicken now, for it was a warm season, where by-and-by the little leaf-shoots would unfold, to the mossy path which led into the nearest plantation. Lady Lowater was the first to speak.

'Miss Pentwistle, I was very much annoyed about those traps. I am afraid I was almost rude to you. I am very sorry.'

'Oh, my dear Lady Lowater, don't mention it. It was nothing, nothing at all, I assure you. I can quite understand how excessively annoying it must have been to you to have your orders countermanded.'

'Not countermanded, Miss Pentwistle,' said her ladyship, with a scornful flash in the faded grey eyes. 'Not countermanded. We have not come to that yet. Misunderstood, we will say.'

Miss Pentwistle knew pretty well that it was a case of countermanding, and not the first by any means, that had chanced. But it was no use putting my lady into a bad temper again, now that she had so generously come to herself. At the same time one might as well give Mr. Antony, under the circumstances, another push into the mire.

'I quite understood Jefferson to say he had been ordered to put them down; but at any rate there they are, and doing Mr. Antony's work too. Look.' And Miss Pentwistle, stopping, pointed to where amongst the thick green moss, in which Jefferson had set the trap, a little white kitten, caught by the throat in the cruel steel, was bleeding helplessly to death.

'Such shocking cruelty, is it not, Lady Lowater?' she said, drawing her dress aside as they both went towards the trap. 'And the poor thing is not dead yet. I really wonder how the keepers can be so heartless, even if Mr. Antony does give them orders.'

Lady Lowater, with a light in her eyes that was not all of pity, pushed away the moss and bent down over the blood-dabbled mass of white fur.

'It is Margaret Dyson's poor little kitten,' she said. 'I had rather the best horse in the stables had died. I know how she cared for it. And all to keep the weasels from a few wretched eggs. I am afraid it is no use doing anything for it now.'

'Oh! do not touch it,' said Miss Pentwistle, as Lady Lowater was going to loosen the springs. 'You might hurt yourself, you know. Those things are so dangerous. We shall be sure to meet Jefferson, and we can send him on to look after it. I cannot bear to see suffering.'

'Neither can I,' said her ladyship, quietly. 'Walk on to the rock-seat, and I will come to you.'

Then she released the poor little creature, and seeing that its wound was past help or healing, she put it out of its misery with a sharp blow of the steel upon its head. As she did so, Jefferson himself came in sight.

'Jefferson, how is this?' she said, pointing to the little white fluffy mass, which

lay quietly enough now upon the dead last year's leaves.

'It was Mr. Antony's orders, my lady,' he said, turning the victim carelessly over with his boot toe. 'The pole-cats, and weasels, and things is very destructive to the game, and if you happen to catch anything as isn't, why, it can't be helped.'

'It can, Jefferson, especially when you have my distinct orders that these traps are not to be set.'

'Very sorry, my lady. I'm sure it wasn't no disobedience of mine. Leastways, Mr. Antony told me I'd got it to do, and when I said I'd your orders against it he told me there couldn't be two masters where the game was concerned.'

'There are not to be two masters anywhere here, Jefferson, in future. Will you remember that?'

'I will, my lady. I'm sure I didn't

mean no offence. I thought, by the way Mr. Antony told me, it was your ladyship's wishes he was a-carrying out, and I'm not one as goes against them that's set over me. It haven't had a deal to put up with anyways, for it isn't a matter of three-quarters of an hour since I was past Ben Dyson's and seed his daughter a-playing with it, and it's as dead as a stone now.'

'Yes, because I took it out myself and killed it.'

The man looked at her admiringly.

'You've a good nerve, my lady. There isn't a-many would have done it; and there's some says it's better to leave 'em, 'cause of being a warning to the rest of the vermin. It was only last week Mr. Antony and me come along here, and one of Bulstrode's terrier pups was caught in it, and might have been there while it was

starved to death, being as it wasn't a mortal hurt. Mr. Antony he loosed it for Bulstrode to do the best he could with it, but he said, if it had been a vermin, he would have let it be, for them creatures takes a deal of notice, and when they see a thing caught they know as well as a Christian their own turn may come next.'

'You mean you actually leave them to die in the traps.'

'Yes, my lady, or for the other creatures to pick 'em to pieces. That's how it is mostways. There's a deal o' cruelty goes on, my lady, where the game has to be preserved strict, but a man like me can only do what he's told.'

'Exactly. Then will you do as I tell you, Jefferson, and see to it that not one of these traps is put down again? And this time my orders are not to be countermanded.'

'They shan't, my lady, any more, let Mr. Antony say as much as he likes. There is a sort that catches 'em alive, and you can finish 'em merciful; and there's another sort that's bound to kill 'em in a jiffey.'

'Get that sort, then,' said Lady Lowater, sharply. 'Let the creatures be put out of their misery at once.'

'Yes, my lady. And maybe I'd best bury this here,' said Jefferson, giving the little bit of white fluff another toss with his foot.

'No, you may leave it. I shall take it myself to Margaret Dyson, and tell her how sorry I am for what has happened. Go now.'

And as the man shouldered his gun and went away, Lady Lowater murmured to herself,

'He said he had seen them caught in a

trap and die as slow as slow could be, unless somebody found them and killed them. O God! if only some one would find me and do as mercifully!'

CHAPTER V.

The rock-seat, to which Miss Pentwistle had been bidden to betake herself when the sight of the poor little wounded kitten proved too much for her sensibilities, was situated in an open space at the top of a knoll just on the borders of the Lowater property. Lady Lowater had had the ground cleared and a seat made amongst some fragments of rock, because from that point, and from that point only, she could get in winter-time a glimpse of the sea. At all other seasons of the year Lady Belleray's chestnut-trees, forming the

boundary of that part of her estate, made a leafy screen just thick enough to keep out the little bit of distant prospect. But, as late autumn stripped them, there gleamed through the gold of their decay a widening streak of azure, and, when the crown had been quite dashed away from their heads, one could look over and beyond them to a great stretch of blue, with here and there a white-sailed vessel upon its calm.

And there, when the north-wind blew so strongly that she could scarcely hold her footing, Lady Lowater would stand gazing upon that bit of distance, widening day by day as the chestnuts lost their glory; heaven looking-in through earth's decay, Mr. Rock had once said, but my lady knew nothing about that sort of thing. She only knew that, girt in as she was there by bands which her own long-

ago past folly had made, it was a relief to have one opening through which she could look out into infinite distance—distance of air and ocean and sunset glow—distance which gave her a passing sense of freedom, though its reality could never more be given.

And, though my lady would never ask a favour of anyone, she had sometimes given her neighbour to understand that it would be an improvement to the Lowater property if just one of those chestnuttrees could be cut down, so that not only in dreary winter time, but all through the long sunshiny summer days, that bit of blue sea might send its peaceful message over to the rock-seat. But Lady Belleray did not understand. At least she did not act. And Lady Lowater had long since given up saying anything about it.

Thither Miss Pentwistle went, not sorry

to be alone for a little while. She, too, had her reasons for discontent that afternoon. In the course of her round of calls upon the gossips of Scarmouth, she had heard, and from no meaner an authority than Mrs. Petipase, that Mr. Antony was about to be married to a lady living at Hurchester, up in the north, and that the wedding was to take place within a month.

Of course Mr. Antony was at liberty to do as he liked, and it was her own fault, Miss Pentwistle was bound to remember that, that he was in circumstances to ask any lady at all to be his wife. If she had not been quite so anxious, some fifteen years ago, for what is called a good establishment, if she had been willing to take him as he was then, trusting to his own native sharpness and prudence for advancement in his profession, she might now

have been mistress in that ten-roomed villa on the Byborough Road, with its pony-carriage and its manservant and all the rest of its desirabilities, Mr. Antony himself included.

But there were difficulties. Even in the days of her youth, Miss Pentwistle looked beforehand. Mr. Antony had a brother, a scapegrace brother, handsomer, braver, taller, altogether a more manlylooking fellow than himself—which indeed might well be—but a scapegrace still, so much a scapegrace that, instead of sharing with his elder brother the profession which they inherited from their father, he had had to leave the neighbourhood in disgrace, and, after prowling about in London and elsewhere for a few years, had finally betaken himself to the Continent, where he might be at this present, for all she knew to the contrary.

Now Miss Pentwistle was not minded to cast in her lot with a man who was working his way up, and who had a scapegrace for his younger brother. Because who could tell how much of the professional profits might be drained away in that direction? People said that Mr. Clayton Antony had paid Theodore the scapegrace to retire from the practice on not very honourable or remunerative terms, and that for that reason he would constantly be liable to demands upon him from a brother who, if he ever reasoned at all, might soon reason himself into the belief that he had been unfairly dealt with.

Not that Theodore had been dealt with otherwise than he deserved. If a man will not work, neither shall he eat. Miss Pentwistle could easily have convinced herself from the beginning that for the younger brother to prowl in the slums of London or elsewhere, and for the elder to appropriate the profits of the profession, was only even-handed justice. But it was the possibility of the scapegrace making his appearance at any time, with demands for money or board and lodging, which gave her pause when Clayton Antony, the Lowater family lawyer, asked her to be his wife. And, doubting not that better chances would be hers, she declined the honour.

Now well on to twenty years of steady work, joined with a little of what some people were wont to call under their breath sharp practice, had made him a man of substance, and poor Theodore had never turned up, either to drain the legal funds, or disgrace the legal profession; and Miss Pentwistle, though very comfortable in her position at Lowater Court, would not have required a very strong pressure to

induce her to reconsider her decision.

But Mr. Antony showed no signs of wishing her to do so, though their frequent intercourse ever since she became Lady Lowater's companion had given him opportunity enough for it. Nay, he had now taken this way of showing her that the past was quite past.

Miss Pentwistle was annoyed. Most women are, when a suitor whom they have dismissed comforts himself, even after ever so long an interval, in matrimony. And that very circumscribed plot of ground which she was wont to call her emotional nature had seldom been so scratched up by the rake of circumstances, not to speak of the severer process of ploughing, as when she returned from the house of Mrs. Petipase that afternoon, in time to accompany Lady Lowater on her accustomed stroll through the grounds.

Lady Lowater's touch of temper precluded conversation at first. Then came the episode of the unfortunate little kitten, and she had been sent on to the rock-seat in advance. There, she had had time enough to think over matters; and there she had waited and waited, until, thinking that Lady Lowater must have forgotten all about her, she got up and walked away, intending to return to the Court by the path leading past Ben Dyson's cottage.

Entering that path, she saw Lady Lowater coming to meet her, the little dead kitten, wrapped up in moss, lying in her arms. My lady looked sad and worried, but she had evidently parted with her ill-temper, for she entered into conversation at once.

'I have nothing but apologies for you this afternoon, Miss Pentwistle,' she said.

'First of all, I was rude to you, and then I quite forgot you were waiting for me at the rock-seat. I began talking to Jefferson about those traps. I don't think he will misunderstand me any more now.'

'I don't think he misunderstood you before, Lady Lowater. It was Mr. Antony's doing, depend upon it; and Mr. Antony knows as well as can be that you do not wish to have them put down. Whatever else happens, he has made up his mind that the game is to be taken care of on this particular corner of the estate.'

'I don't see that it makes any difference to him,' said Lady Lowater, carelessly. 'The shooting is let. He has nothing to do with it.'

Miss Pentwistle thought she might as well say it now. She had known it ever since the first shot of the season was fired, but there was not so much cause to do Mr. Antony an ill-turn then.

'Oh! dear Lady Lowater, how little notice you do take of things. Is it possible you don't know that Mr. Antony reserved a hundred acres of the shooting for your requirements, or, to speak more correctly, for his own? Mr. Tallington has nothing to do with the preserves on this side, as Mr. Antony's gentlemen friends know very well. I thought you knew all about it, or I would have mentioned it to you before. Why, the fish and game people at Byborough, if you asked them——'

'Oh! well, never mind,' said Lady Lowater, with a gesture of angry impatience. 'I don't want to hear anything about it. The traps are done away with, once for all; and, as for the game, I wish there was not a head of it upon the estate. It is one of the things a lady cannot worry about. One must let men have their way. Did you hear any news down at Scarmouth? You generally pick up something when you go there.'

'Yes; and I picked up something this time; two or three somethings, indeed. Shall I begin with the smallest first?'

'Yes; though, I daresay, it is all pretty much small alike. However, one may as well have the heavy artillery at the last. Has Mrs. Pontifex succeeded in getting the bailiffs into her husband's house yet? We will call that grape-shot.'

'I don't know, I am sure,' said Miss Pentwistle, with the careless ease of a person who, having plenty of sixpences in her purse, can afford to fling about a few coppers at first. 'Mrs. Petipase did tell me something about her, but I quite forget what it was. Old Mrs. Lumleigh said she had heard that the —th was ordered home. You know she has a nephew in it.'

'Yes, but the regiment is not going to be ordered home on that account. Poor old Mrs. Lumleigh is always hearing that her pet is coming home. I do wish he would sell out and marry a wife, and have done with it, just to give his aunt a chance of being at rest. Anything else?'

'Yes; they say that Mr. Moberly goes oftener than ever to Lady Belleray's, and that black-eyed little Julia is the attraction.'

'Oh! I daresay her ladyship will make him very welcome to her. Evelyn, you know, is intended for Sir Merrion. At any rate, Lady Belleray wants him for her. She never fails to ask me when he is coming home to look for a wife. Indeed, she has gone so far as to inquire where I shall live when my boy is married. I heard she had been asking the Dollingbrokes that, and so next time I saw her I made a point of telling her that Merrion never intends me to have any other home than the Court, so long as I choose to remain in it. I thought, you know, that might frighten her. But no; Evelyn keeps on being as attentive as ever. Miss Pentwistle, I do believe, if Merrion really did come home, Lady Belleray would have those chestnuts cut down, on speculation, you know. Nothing would help on her interests in my direction more than that. I think both Merrion and myself would be overcome if the chestnuts came down.

'Lady Lowater, you are so bitter.'

'Bitter, my dear Miss Pentwistle? I am nothing of the sort. I am only amusing myself with other people's anxiety to

get their daughters settled. And why they are so anxious, I don't know. It seems to me that the unmarried ones get the most peace and quietness. The reason that I respect you, Miss Pentwistle, is your contentment with your position. You are content, are you not?'

'I am quite content, Lady Lowater.'

'Yes, I knew it. Even if Mr. Rock laid himself and his prospects at your feet, they would not tempt you to change your condition.'

'Not at all. I am not sure that either Mr. Rock or his prospects would appear to me in the light of a temptation. I look upon the position of a clergyman's wife as an exceedingly satisfactory one, but I draw the line at a hundred a year.'

'Very rightly so; and Mr. Rock is two pounds ten short of it. Well, *did* you hear anything more?'

'I did. I heard of an actual engagement. Mr. Antony is to be married.'

Lady Lowater gave a slight start, and set her lips together. This was heavy artillery. For who knew how much a husband might tell his wife, supposing he married her for love? But Lady Lowater was not a woman to let anyone see that she was taken by surprise, still less that she was afraid.

'Mr. Antony going to be married!' she said, laying the moss tenderly over the little dead kitten in her arms. 'What a mean thing for him never to have told us anything about it. And is it to be soon?'

'Within a month, Mrs. Petipase said. Or was it two?'

'Meaner still; when he knows I should want time to get a wedding-present ready for him. One must needs do as much for the man who takes such good care of one's pheasants. And who is the lady?'

'A Mrs. Dormer, Mrs. Petipase says.'

'Mrs.—then, she is a widow. Or else one generally expects a man of his age to marry a girl. Where does she live, and who may she be?'

'Well, all Mrs. Petipase could tell me was that she lives at Hurchester, and——'

'Hurchester? That is where Merrion used to be with his regiment.'

'Yes, she lives at Hurchester, and she is very handsome and agreeable, and she has a grown-up daughter who is very practical —does work in the hospitals, and that sort of thing.'

'The mother handsome and agreeable; the daughter only self-sacrificing, a hospital nurse, in fact. No wonder that Mr. Antony marries the mother. And how about money?'

'Narrow means, I believe, though she has always kept up a genteel appearance. So Mrs. Petipase says.'

'Ah! then it is the handsomeness that has done it. I should almost have thought he would have married for money.'

'Yes, and especially if he married a widow with a grown-up daughter. But then, you know, he has very good means of his own. And the pheasants bring in something.'

Lady Lowater laughed. It was a bitter laugh this time.

'I am not going to worry about that. If a man likes to be a sneak, he must take the consequences.'

'I wonder you let him come to the house, in that case, Lady Lowater. For my part, I should hate the sight of him.'

'I have to do many things which I would rather leave undone, Miss Pent-

wistle. Amongst them is the courteous entertainment of the man whom Sir Guy appointed his family solicitor. But here we are at the cottage. I am going to take poor Margaret her kitten, and tell her how sorry I am about it. Do not wait for me. I shall be home in time for dinner.'

CHAPTER VI.

Miss Pentwistle returned to the Court, not sorry to have unlimited leisure for the performance of her toilette arrangements. It was one of the drawbacks of those afternoon strolls with Lady Lowater that they left so little time for dinner preparations. And Miss Pentwistle was a person who did not like to be hurried. Even in her early youth, precision had been one of her strong points. It had grown with her growth and strengthened with her strength, until now, at forty-five, hurry was a thing simply impossible. Besides, in her young days

she had never been dowered with that kind of beauty which only needs a dash and a fling to put it at its best, and which, with a flying end here and a bow there, and a chance knot of ribbon somewhere else, satisfies all the requirements of decoration. Unless Miss Pentwistle was neat, she was nothing. She depended for her every-day comfort upon a degree of exactitude which to most people would have been intolerable. She could not read morning-prayers with any amount of satisfaction unless she had assured herself before leaving her own room that her black jet brooch was equi-distant from the two front points of her linen collar, and that those two points formed an angle of ninety degrees, resulting in the effect of a triangle, the apex of which was exactly under her chin. And this mathematical precision was carried through the whole of her dress, so that, when she was attired to her own satisfaction, one could demonstrate her like a proposition of Euclid.

Of course, that sort of thing took time, and time was what Lady Lowater did not always give her. Indeed, as the season advanced, so that there was room for a stroll between afternoon tea and dinner, her ladyship would go wandering about until the sound of the dressing-gong surprised them in one or other of the distant plantations, and Miss Pentwistle had to make a rush for it, and telegraph through her toilette with unseemly haste, and sit down to dinner in full view of the old family butler, with painful uncertainty as to the relative lengths of the three ringlets which she wore behind each ear, to say nothing of a positive doubt, deepening into conviction as the meal went on, that her lace ruffle was fastened fully half-aninch to one side of the top button of her dress, instead of exactly in front of it. And how far a conviction of that kind can spoil the flavour of the most delicate *entrée* that was ever invented, or completely neutralise the effect of the choicest sweets, only people like Miss Pentwistle can realise.

But this afternoon she had time enough and to spare, whilst Lady Lowater was making her explanations and apologies to the woodman's daughter.

Ben Dyson, the woodman, lived in a tidy little cottage which formed one of the lodges to the Court property. His wife had died some years before, leaving him alone in the world, but for one daughter, who was upper-housemaid at the Court, Lady Lowater preferring, as far as she could, to have servants about her whose parents were employed on the estate. Margaret Dyson used to go home

every day, to do what was necessary for her father's comfort; for, ever since his wife's death, he had insisted upon living in the house by himself rather than having anyone about him who did not belong to his own kith and kin. A rough-tongued, but tender-hearted old man was Ben Dyson; true as steel to those whom he could trust, hard as flint to those who had wronged him; able to forgive, but never able to forget, an injury, and with a pride sometimes truer in its honest independence than that which goes clothed in scarlet and velvet.

But now his daughter Margaret was always at home with him, though that would not be for long. Her health had failed, and, after being well cared for and tended by Lady Lowater, who loved her for her simple straightforwardness, she had been obliged to give up her work at the Court, and return to the woodman's cottage, to wait there as patiently as she could for death. And why she was waiting for it so patiently, and why its slow oncoming brought no fear, Stephen Rock knew better than most others; for, though he had not what Miss Pentwistle called popular pulpit talent, he had that other, and sometimes more useful talent, which teaches the weary that Heaven is a land not very far off, and the heavy laden that rest is near.

Ben Dyson had another daughter, but he had not heard from her now for many a year. Not that there was anything disgraceful about her, as the old man would explain, with due dignity, when by chance any inquiry was made concerning her whereabouts. Indeed, rather the contrary, she having in quite early life married so far above her station that she had not cared since to hold any intercourse with her own family.

'Our Libbie,' as she used to be called by her parents in the days when she really belonged to them, was still remembered in the village as a remarkably pretty girl, round, rosy, fair, bright, with a certain kind of elegance about her quite at variance with her position, which was that of scullery-maid at the Court. However, she did not stay there very long, for the Court in old Sir Guy Lowater's time was not a very safe place for a young and pretty girl, especially if she happened to be, as Libbie certainly was, conscious of her own attractions. So her father and mother removed her, Lady Lowater knowing quite well, though nothing was said about it, what was the difficulty; and Libbie went to be general servant somewhere at a distance from Byborough.

The next they heard of her was that she had married a gentleman who lodged with her employers. Married him safely, legally, properly, and respectably, Mrs. Porringer, Libbie's mistress, having written to tell them they need have no doubts on that head. Indeed, she said Libbie was a very prudent girl, one who would never be led astray by promises or appearances. And though she herself had no just cause to speak well of her—for her conduct, after the kindness and consideration shown to her in providing the wedding breakfast and outfit, was most ungrateful; not even a letter of thanks or acknowledgment since the marriage—still Mrs. Porringer could assure her friends that that marriage was perfectly legal and straightforward, and that they might feel quite satisfied about their daughter's position.

That was the last intelligence of Libbie Dyson. And as old Ben used to say, with not unjustifiable indignation,

'I don't want to hear no more. Libbie's that sort as can take good care of herself; and if she's too grand to remember her poor father, why, he can make shift to do without her.'

That was how things had been at the woodman's cottage for more than twenty years, during which time the mother had died, and Margaret, a little child when her sister went away, had grown into a grave thoughtful, serviceable woman, and then had faded slowly month by month, still holding fast with the stedfastness of her race, always firm in its purpose, whether for good or ill, to such work as was possible to her, until now there was but a little way between her and the end.

'I am very sorry, Margaret,' said Lady

Lowater, as courteously as though she had been making the apology to the Countess of Muchmarch herself. 'I found your poor little kitten caught in one of the traps in the plantation. I told Jefferson, some time ago, that those traps were not to be put down again, but there was some mistake about it, and this is the consequence. I can only tell you how grieved I am. However, I have now distinctly told him to bring them all to me and have them destroyed in my presence, but that cannot undo what has been done.

Margaret was sitting by the kitchen fireside, in a big chintz-covered chair, the chair her mother had died in. For the present she was able to go about the house a little, and with her father's help do what was needful to be done. She was a sensible, intelligent-looking woman, with that great calm in her eyes which the peace of death brings to those who are nearing it. Good-looking, one would have said, like 'our Libbie' who was far away, but there was something shining through the well-cut features which the more prosperous sister, with all her prettiness, must have missed.

'I did the best I could for it,' Lady Lowater continued. 'It was not quite dead when I found it, but I knew you would not wish it to linger on in its misery.'

'Then you did your best, and I thank your ladyship,' said Margaret, laying her cheek to the soft little white head, and fingering the little paws which would never beguile her with their playfulness any more. 'Those traps are cruel things. I've heard father say how the hedgehogs lie for days, half cut through in

them; and he once brought home a leveret that had had its neck well near eaten away as it lay caught, but it was alive all the same. It's a deal mercifuller thing when they're killed right away. But I hadn't ought to mention such things to your ladyship.'

'If such things are not too cruel to happen they are not too cruel to be spoken about,' said Lady Lowater. 'But your kitten did not fare so badly as that. Jefferson told me he had only put the trap down about three-quarters of an hour before I found her. It was well done to in this thing that death came to it soon. And now I will bury it for you. You must not sit looking at it like that.'

And Lady Lowater turned the little dead creature so that the gaping wound in its throat should not show. Margaret's lip trembled.

'You mustn't take that trouble, my lady. Father will put it somewhere out of the way when he comes in. It isn't for the like of you to be worrying about it.'

'No, Margaret, I will do it. I am the right person to do it. I know where your father keeps his spade, in that outhouse among the ivy, does he not? Where would you like it to be laid?'

But Margaret was crying. She could not speak.

Lady Lowater rose. The tears seldom came into her own eyes. There was only a cramp in her fine straight brows, and a set, hard expression upon her lips. She went away into the outhouse, got the spade, dug a little grave under a lauristinus bush, just in front of the kitchen window, and then, gently taking the dead kitten from Margaret's lap, laid it there with the moss round it.

'There,' she said, coming back after all was made tidy and the spade put away. 'You can see its grave as you sit here all the day. And now you know that it can never suffer any more.'

And, without another word, my lady went away. But half an hour later, when Margaret turned herself to look, there was a pot of white hyacinths laid upon the newly smoothed earth, hyacinths whiter and sweeter than any in all the country round. My lady had hastened home and chosen them out of her store in the greenhouses, and put them there herself, as a peace-offering for the ill that by no fault of hers had been done.

'If anyone could put them on my own grave it were better,' she said to herself as she turned away, 'but white flowers are not for me.'

CHAPTER VII.

'She's a good sort, is my Lady Lowater,' said old Ben, when he came home and heard about it all. 'I chanced upon the head gardener as I was coming through the potting sheds, and he told me her ladyship was that particular that he could scarce please her with a good enough plant. He didn't want her to have that one, didn't Marshall, because Mr. Antony had spoke for it to be sent up with some game to where his new missis is a-coming from, but my lady said to Margaret Dyson it should go, and nowheres else. And that's the first time she's ever gone dead

against anything of Mr. Antony's doing.'

'Ay, father, and to think of her burying the little thing with her very own hands, all thick with jewels as they were. And looked at me when she'd done it as if she couldn't be sorry enough. If it's a kind heart and a tender can make a woman happy, then my lady ought to be. And yet she don't carry it in her face, and there's people says you can't find her equal for stiffness.'

'And have said it to me, too, Margaret, but I always tells them it is because they have not gone far enough down. She's never stiff to them as does their proper duty by her. But, stiffness or no stiffness, it isn't happiness that my Lady Lowater carries in her face.'

'No, father, it isn't, for all she's as kind as kind can be. Maybe there's something

she can't make straight. Folks that are high learned, and has their own thinking to do, must often be hard put to it. It takes a meek spirit to be content.'

'Maybe that's it, Madge honey. For Luke Ballantyne, him as sings bass in the choir, says he has never seen anything like her face sometimes when the sermon is on. You know where he sits he can see her as the most of us can't, and he says her eyes would turn a cinder cold, and stares him through and through, albeit he isn't on with any manner of mischief. But to my mind it isn't looking that she means at all. She don't heed him any more than if he was a mawkin in a cornfield. It's just that she's agate with her own thoughts.'

'Oh, father! And that they should make her look like that.'

'One can't tell, honey. Anyhow,

there's that in her eyes that isn't like the most of people in church. I've seen it myself, for when Barnaby isn't there I sit next Ballantyne, right in front of her.'

'Well, father, they may say what they will, but this I'm sure of, there isn't a kinder heart in the parish, nor a truer, than my lady's; and I should know, for I was ten years at the Court from first to last.'

'Libbie had used to say she was very sharp though, Madge.'

'Maybe she did, father, and I wonder who wouldn't have been sharp with a girl when they thought their own husband was setting eyes upon her, for an old simpleton as he was. I've heard you say myself, father, that Libbie was always one who knew when a man passed her way. I was over young to understand anything about it when she lived scullery-maid at

the Court, but I've seen the girls there when Sir Merrion and the officers were about with their dogs at the back, and, if I'd been my lady, I would have given it them just the same. Sharpness isn't more than they deserve when it's a man at all, to say nothing of the man being somebody else's husband, and that somebody oneself. It isn't me Libbie would have got to stand by her if I'd been old enough to know, when she come home in her tempers because my lady had been hard upon her.'

'Madge, you're as stiff-backed as my lady herself,' said old Ben Dyson, with a little of the natural soft-heartedness of a man towards the pretty fools who fall down and worship him. 'Libbie was only like the most of them for that. There's many a girl does it, and never thinks a bit of harm.'

'Not when she's doing it to somebody else's husband? Nay, father, there you're wrong. I lay if any of them gentlemen with their guns had chanced to come past here when first you married mother, and her the best-looking girl in the parish, and had given her as much as a look that he oughtn't, you'd have been down upon him with your fists, let him be my Lord Muchmarch, or let him be who he might.'

'Ay, that would I, wench,' said old Ben, with a gleam from under his shaggy brows of the temper which keeps English hearths and homes at their best. And then he dropped his head a little.

'You've caught me there, Madge. It's when it comes home to oneself, one knows what it is. If it was that way, my lady had good need to be sharp.'

'Then that was the way it was, father. Libbie didn't mean any harm, I don't suppose, not a bit; and I only know what I've heard poor mother say. But, since I've been grown up, I've seen it for myself. It's a way a girl has, especially if she's good-looking, of letting a gentleman see that she knows it, and that she doesn't mind if he knows it too. And old Sir Guy was the sort that would let her see that he knew it. Mother was in the right of it to take her away.'

'Yes, Madge, I don't doubt it. And Libbie did well for herself with going away—so well that she doesn't stand need to think of her old father any more now. That's a poor way of doing.'

'Yes, father, but it might have been worse.'

'You're right, Madge; and I don't complain. She was safe bound an honest wife, and that was the most I had to look to. I often used to tell your mother Libbie wasn't the sort to stay quiet in a place like this, when she could better herself by stirring about. And where she's got to now, isn't here nor there to me any longer. I don't doubt but what she's eating her bread with a deal more butter to it than what you and me get, and, as long as she's eating it honestly, I'm content. She's done with me and I've done with her, and there's an end.'

'But, if anything happened as she come back, father, you wouldn't turn upon her.'

'Turn upon her, honey—what should I turn upon her for? But she'll none come back. I've no doubt she's holding up her head now among as good folk as she once washed dishes for. If it had been anything different, Peg, you and me would have heard tell of it. Shame never stands need of a coach and four to bring it faster to them that it can hurt. As long as we

don't hear nothing, Libbie is as safe in her silks and satins as me in my clouts.'

'I believe she is, father; and now I'm tired. It kind of overset me, did my lady being so tender and so thoughtful. And I loved the little bit of a dead thing out there. I was fain to shed tears, for all my lady was standing right up beside me.'

'And didn't need to be ashamed of it, honey,' said the old woodman, coming nearer to his daughter and taking her hand, white with the touch of death, into his own which had so much of life's rough work to do.

And then there was silence for awhile, and then he said, patiently, quietly, as men of his sort speak of these things,

'Peg honey, the doctor says you haven't a far way to go now.'

'I know that, father, without his telling me. One don't stand in need of a doctor to tell you what's plain enough to see. And whether it's long or whether it's short I don't trouble, only for how things will be with you when I'm away.'

'Then don't trouble for that, wench. I shall do for myself, never fear. It isn't being left alone as will ever be too much for me, so long as I know you're well took care on. You've been a good wench to me, Peg, and I'd like to know you are going where you'd get your earnings.'

'I'm going where it'll be all right, father, don't you be afraid.'

Ben looked hard into the fire, a world of doubting and questioning in his weatherworn face. Then he said,

'Now there's Miss Pentwistle. She says there isn't no such thing as earnings over yonder, saving and except as you earn what don't do you any good. She says you may labour and toil and use the best

of your endeavours, but it's all to one ending as long as you don't believe same as she believes. And she says a deal worse nor that, for she says the better you do the worse it'll be for you if the believing isn't there, and that the only wages you ever get in kingdom come is the wages for evil doing. Now, Peggy honey, that's what stumps me. It's all fair and even enough for a man to take his beatings when he's been a rascal, and to feel he's deserved 'em too. But just the same if he's done the best of his possibles, ay, and done 'em when it's been a hard work and a long, then I say give him his earnings and make him welcome to 'em. Don't go and say to him all the bad's your own and all the good's some one else's. That isn't how a kind master would treat an honest servant on this side, and I can't see why he should be treated so on the other neither.'

'Father, it gets past me when it comes to that. But Mr. Rock could tell you all about it. He says the next world is just what you make it for yourself, by the way you live in this.'

'Does he, though. Then he doesn't sail in the same boat with Miss Pentwistle. I'd go and hear him a bit oftener, ay, that would I, if I thought he'd half as much sense in him as that. Why, it's something for a man to feel he's got his own share in it, and if he does his best his master's pleased with him, and if he sneaks he's got his punishment to bear. That's my sort of religion.'

'And it's Mr. Rock's too, father, if you gave yourself a chance to find it out.'

'Then I will, Peggy, that will I, for I'm often sore put to it, though I don't say nothing about these things. And now, wench, if you're tired, lean your head down on my shoulder and have a bit of sleep.'

CHAPTER VIII.

'Pur me into my velvet gown, Jennings, as soon as you can,' said Lady Lowater, stepping down the corridor, quiet and stately, between the two long rows of family portraits, one of those a portrait of herself as a bride in bridal raiment. 'Put me into my velvet gown and let the ornaments alone for to-night. I know I am late, and I do not want to keep Miss Pentwistle waiting for dinner.'

'And if she did have to wait for you, my lady,' said the obsequious Jennings, 'it isn't for her to complain so very much. It isn't what she's had to do many times this fifteen years past. And, as for your ladyship going down to dinner without what is proper in the way of ornaments, I should be sorry to think it had come to *that*.'

And accordingly, after laying forth the well-worn black velvet, Jennings, with the decision of a woman who knows her duty, unlocked her mistress's jewel-case, and took out the diamond set which Lady Lowater always wore of an evening, saying as she did so,

'It isn't a matter of who waits or who doesn't wait; it is that I should dress you, my lady, as becomes the mistress of Lowater Court; and that I would do if there were fifty Miss Pentwistles wanting the dinner-bell to ring.'

'Very well, Jennings. Do as you like, only be quick about it. It doesn't signify what you put on me.'

'Yes, my lady, that is what you always

say. If your ladyship only knew how you look when you let me do my best for you, you wouldn't say it didn't signify. There is never anyone comes to this house that can hold a candle to your ladyship for being as stately as stately can be when you have what is proper to it.'

'I should be sorry to think, Jennings, that the stateliness depended on velvet and diamonds,' said my lady, as the maid, having seated her mistress in the great arm-chair in front of the mirror, proceeded to let down and arrange her long wavy hair, almost silver white, though she was not fifty yet. 'They say old women like to be flattered, but you need not trouble me with it. Diamonds or no diamonds are all the same to me.'

Jennings smiled to just the extent that a person in her position ought to smile when on duty.

'Do you think I haven't found that out, my lady, and me having waited upon you this twenty-five years? If ever there was anything that tempted me to give up, it was your never letting me do my best for you—at least, never since just at the first —any more than if you were the most ordinary woman stepping. I've often said a maid that understands her business is wasted upon you, my lady. What I could do with your beautiful white hair, if you would only let me! To my thinking, it's more beautiful now than it was five and twenty years ago, when first I set it for you. And there have been many changes since then, my lady.'

Lady Lowater, her hands clasped upon her scarlet dressing-gown, looked away past the mirror to the south plantation, where it crept up the rising ground towards the rock-seat. Leafless now, purpleblack in the gloom. Many changes? Yes. Once it had been very pleasant to wander there amongst the primroses and bluebells, Lady Belleray's chestnuts so thick in leaf that not a bit of the far-off ocean peeped through. Joy for her so close, pleasure so luring, life so young, that through their veils no future reckoning time had leave to look. Now the primroses were gone, and the trees were bare, and one could see the cruel traps amongst the moss, and one did not need to be told that a living creature could lie caught in one of them, bleeding, struggling for days. Nay, not for days, for many and many a year, no one coming by to kill it out of its misery.

But her ladyship only smiled at the waiting-woman's kindly flatteries.

'The less you do with grey hairs, Jennings, the better. When it comes to that,

tuck them out of sight under a cap and stay at home.'

'Which is just what you do, my lady, and more pity. For my part, I say that it's often not until grey hairs come that you've time to think about enjoying yourself. And then, put them under a cap or do what you will with them, you're old enough and sensible enough to get some good out of life. I wouldn't go back again and be young, not I. And when Sir Merrion marries, and you've somebody young and pretty about you, and grandchildren chattering and pattering all over the place, why, your ladyship will be as cheerful as ever. Talk about not caring! If it was Miss Pentwistle I had to do for, she wouldn't tell me it was no consequence what I put her into. I have had to do for her sometimes, my lady, and the less the better.'

'I daresay, Jennings. Miss Pentwistle thinks more about these things than I do. Will you see that the fire is made up here in good time. I shall not be late to-night.'

Something in my lady's tone showed the perceptive Jennings that further remarks were not required, and with fine tact she struck off into indifferent topics, or lapsed into a cheerful, unconscious sort of silence which had no touch of sullenness in it, until her work was accomplished, just as the dinner-gong sounded.

'I told your ladyship it should be done,' she said, with a confident smile, as Lady Lowater gathered up her handkerchief and fan and other small belongings. 'As long as I am what I am, my mistress shall not go down of an evening without everything that is proper, let her give me as little encouragement as ever she likes for it.'

Lady Lowater turned and looked in the

mirror. Very satisfactory for everything but the face. The face so hard, so joyless, so emptied of everything that had made it once like that bridal face in the long corridor. But one must not think of that.

'You are a good soul, Jennings. I wish you had somebody better to spend your talent upon. But you must have patience. One cannot last for ever.'

'If you are content, my lady, I am,' said Jennings, with a curtsey.

CHAPTER IX.

An hour later the serious business of dinner was over, and Lady Lowater and Miss Pentwistle sat trifling with their wine and walnuts in the long dining-room, all round and about them the portraits of the Lowater people in various stages of freshness or decay. The freshest was that of Sir Guy, which hung over the sideboard. Sir Guy the bloated, wrinkled, and wicked, but a baronet for all that, and therefore a desirable match, in her parents' eyes, for beautiful Gwendolen Merrion, who, though fair and stately enough for the court of the

queen herself, would only achieve a title by marrying for it.

Of course everyone knew that the title, and not Sir Guy, was the attraction. And some people knew, or thought they knew, that beautiful Gwendolen's heart was bestowed in another direction. But was it likely that her parents would allow her to wed the younger brother of a country solicitor, when the head of one of the oldest families in the country wished to make her his wife? Small account where her love was, when circumstances had so plainly marked out the path of prudence. As soon as the baronet's intentions were hinted at, the younger brother, though courteously entreated before, was forbidden Captain Merrion's house. And as soon as the baronet's proposal was made, and the lady's unwilling consent obtained, the judicious parents took their daughter

to Italy, and travelled about with her there, Sir Guy hovering near with splendid presents and promises, until the weddingday was fixed, and, at the little English church in Florence, Gwendolen Merrion become my Lady Lowater, and was brought home one May morning amidst ringing of bells and scattering of flowers and presentation of congratulatory addresses from jubilant tenantry, to the home where she was to live the rest of her days a miserable woman.

And the younger brother. He was of the sort that do not take kindly to disappointment. With a wife that he loved, he would have fought and done well in life's battle; but that wanting, heartlessness and falseness and loneliness instead of that, he struck his colours and went over to the enemy, as many another man has done. For awhile he lingered about in the neighbourhood, prowling by stealth amongst the woods and copses of Lowater, to get speech or sight of the lady who had been false to him, but who loved him still. And then he was to be heard of at the gaming tables of Byborough. And then he sank among the dregs of society, only coming to the surface now and then to sponge upon his respectable elder brother. And then he was finally and entirely paid out of the partnership. And then his clothes were picked up by a fisherman beside one of the rock pools of Scarmouth, and there was an end of poor Theodore Antony.

It was about the time that Theodore used to prowl in the copses and plantations, unknown to anybody but Gwendolen, who would meet him there sometimes, and think what life might have been, that Sir Guy would have my lady's portrait taken in her bridal raiment, and

hung in the long corridor amongst the other Lowater people. And a couple of years later, after those clothes had been picked up on the Scarmouth beach, he had still another picture painted of his bonnie wife; for he was proud of her, as well he might be, though not much love was lost between them, and though her temper tried him. And this time her little lad, now Sir Merrion, sat upon her knee, tugging with chubby fingers, which only had the strength of a year's life in them, at her beautiful golden hair. The face was very fair still, though it had lost a little of its roundness; but for pride and grace, and for the perfectness of every feature, it could hold its own with any of the grand dames whose beauties had been handed down from centuries past. The Merrions were a handsome race, if poor enough, and amongst them all

there had never been one like Gwendolen.

Perhaps my lady had only lost the roundness from her own cheeks to give it to those of her little boy. She had given him her curling, golden hair, too, and his eyes were full of a laughing joy which might once have sparkled in her own. But Sir Guy did not like the picture. The boy had nothing of the Lowater face, he said, not a feature to show that he belonged to the family. And, because he said it so often, my lady had the picture taken away and put in the long corridor. And, after Sir Guy died, she had her own bride-portrait taken away, too; so now there was only the old baronet, hanging in solitary state over the side-board, opposite where my lady sat at dinner-time.

The old family butler, who was Miss Pentwistle's special delight, had placed

the wine upon the table, and taken his departure. The two ladies were left to wile away what time they could over their walnuts. Then they would go into the drawing-room for a nap, then have coffee, then prayers, and to bed. Lady Lowater was not in a talking mood this evening. That being the case, Miss Pentwistle felt it her duty to be the more conversational. Else, how would the time ever be got over? And Mr. Antony's approaching marriage was a fruitful theme.

'Mrs. Petipase tells me the painters are in the house already, and I am sure they have good need to be there. When a man lives alone, he does let things get into a state. And a lady who comes from an establishment of her own knows what to expect. It is not like marrying a young girl. Depend upon it, Mrs. Dormer will make him do what is proper. If a man wants to know what complete subjection is, let him marry a fascinating widow. She will soon teach him.'

'Miss Pentwistle, you are spiteful. You should not bear malice against an old suitor. I am very glad for my own sake that you did not choose to marry Mr. Antony; but be generous to him, nevertheless.'

'Thank you very much, Lady Lowater,' said Miss Pentwistle, taking for granted that Lady Lowater's gladness could only proceed from satisfaction with the manner in which, for the last fifteen years, she had fulfilled her duties as companion to her ladyship. 'I am sure, if I have been able to make you comfortable, it is greatly in consequence of your own kindness to me. No one could have been more considerate.'

Lady Lowater smiled a weary smile.

She had not meant that at all. It was Mr. Antony's marrying anyone, that vexed her. She would have preferred his remaining single. Because, when a man marries, he may tell his wife many things, especially if she is of the beguiling sort. But it was no use enlightening Miss Pentwistle about that. So she only said, carelessly,

'Ah! yes, we get on wonderfully well together. I am sure I should not get on half so well with anyone else. Did Mrs. Petipase tell you anything more about the lady? Is she young?'

'Oh! no She cannot be that, because you know she has a grown-up daughter, the one that is a hospital nurse now at Hurchester.'

'Of course. I forgot, how stupid! We must put her on the shady side of forty then, at any rate. Dormer, Hurchester.

Don't you remember, Miss Pentwistle, when Merrion's regiment was there, he met with that accident and was taken into the hospital because it was close at hand, and a young girl nursed him so splendidly. I am almost sure the name was Dormer. I thought when you first mentioned it to me this afternoon, that I had heard it before. Suppose now it should be the same.'

'It is quite possible. She won't live here, though, if she is a hospital nurse at Hurchester.'

'No. And Mr. Antony is not the man to make a home for somebody else's grown up daughter. At the same time I should very much like to see her. I shall never forget what I owe to anyone who has been kind to my boy.'

'My dear Lady Lowater, she only did her duty. She would never expect you to pay her any extra attention for that. They have to be good to anyone who happens to be brought into their ward. But what else do you think Mrs. Petipase told me?'

'Oh, dear! I cannot tell. That woman is such a well-spring of information.'

'She told me there are reports about in Byborough that Mr. Antony's brother never really was drowned; that scapegrace brother, you know, that was such a disgrace to him. You must remember it. It was not long before dear Sir Guy's death.'

'I remember quite well,' said Lady Lowater, her fingers trembling a little as she picked the kernel out of a walnut. 'He was drowned.'

'So everybody thought, but I always had my doubts. Twenty years ago people believed those things a great deal more

readily than they do now. If a scapegrace wanted to get out of the way of his creditors, he had nothing to do but lay his clothes by a river side, or, still better, by the sea, because one cannot drag that, and then disappear. Everyone took it for granted that he was drowned. But ever since that notorious case of the man at Brighton being drowned in a similar way, and his widow waiting a year or two, and marrying again, and going out to Australia with her second husband, and finding the first flourishing as a successful gold digger, the public has been more sceptical about these mysterious disappearances.'

'Do you mean that people are sceptical now about Mr. Antony's brother?' said LadyLowater, still bending over that bit of kernel that would not be twisted out of the shell.

'Well, Mrs. Petipase said she had heard

doubts expressed, though of course no one would say anything to Mr. Antony. If he happened to be flourishing as a successful gold-digger, it would be right enough, because then he might be made to pay his debts, but Mrs. Petipase seems to think it is anything but that. I wonder if the widow knows.'

'The widow! What widow?' said Lady Lowater, sharply.

'Mrs. Dormer, of course. Mr. Antony's widow. I mean the widow he is going to marry, or to speak more properly who is going to marry him. I have no doubt she is the sort of person who would take the initiative in such matters.'

'Oh! I did not understand you at first. It seemed as if you were speaking of somebody else the other person had left behind.'

'No. I never heard that Mr. Antony's

brother was married at all. I am sure he gave trouble enough without saddling his respectable relative with a widow and family. He must have been a great nuisance until he disappeared.'

Miss Pentwistle spoke with some asperity. She could not forget that, if it had not been for that disreputable family connection, sponging as she was afraid he would upon a once slender professional income, she herself, as Clayton Antony's wife, would have stood effectually in the way of this fascinating Mrs. Dormer, who was now going to appropriate the comforts and conveniences of the villa on the Byborough Road. And, just so far as her personal interests had been damaged, though damaged by her own over-prudent care for them, so far she was ready to credit the yet unknown Mrs. Dormer with any foibles, little or big, which

might militate against her friendly reception in Lowater or Scarmouth society.

'I wonder if she knows there is anybody of that kind likely to turn up. Don't you think, Lady Lowater, it ought to be mentioned to her? In kindness, of course.'

'Exactly,' said my lady, with a hard smile; 'such kindness as we show to people we dislike. Let her find it out for herself, if it has to be found out at all. Mrs. Petipase gathers up all sorts of rubbish in that dredging-net of hers. As likely as not this particular piece may have to be picked out and thrown away.'

'Well, then, if there is not anything uncomfortable in the family now,' persisted Miss Pentwistle, 'she ought to know that there was at one time. A man has no right to——'

Miss Pentwistle gave a little start.

'I am sure I heard a footstep on the terrace.'

'So did I,' said Lady Lowater, quietly.
'It must be Mr. Antony. He is the only person who comes to the terrace entrance at this time of the evening.'

'Oh, dear!' said Miss Pentwistle, 'to think of it. And when we are talking him over so freely. What a good thing it is people don't know what we say about them. Do you think we should mention anything to him about his engagement?'

Lady Lowater shrugged her shoulders.

'I daresay he has come on purpose to tell us about it. He would think it necessary to pay that amount of attention.'

And then she looked up at the footman who had just come in.

'Tell Mr. Antony we will see him here, Simmons. Say we are alone this evening.'

CHAPTER X.

The family solicitor came in. A small, quiet, scantily bearded man, pale of complexion, very carefully dressed, observant in his rapid glance, with a curious mixture in his deportment of something not quite at home with the upper classes, and something else which gave him authority to be there in spite of that lack.

'Good evening, Mr. Antony,' said my lady. 'We thought it would be rather dull for you in the drawing-room, and, you see, we are just a little late to-night.'

'I do see,' said Mr. Antony, with a glance at the clock. 'I thought I should

probably have found you at your coffee in the drawing-room.'

'Yes, and so you would have done; but Miss Pentwistle and I took a walk through the plantations this afternoon, and I found Margaret Dyson's little white kitten caught in one of the vermin-traps, not quite dead. So I put it out of its misery, and then took it to her.'

'Those traps do catch other than vermin sometimes,' said Mr. Antony, quietly.

'They do. But it must not be so any more here. I have told Jefferson most distinctly that they are not to be put down again. Simmons, another bottle of port.'

And sweeping her eyes over the two men with equal indifference, apparently, Lady Lowater dismissed the servant for wine, and motioned Mr. Antony to a seat at the table. There was a silence. Her ladyship was breathing a little more quickly than usual. One could tell that by the restless sparkle of the diamonds at her throat. And those on her rings, too, gave a hundred sparkles for one that they had given before. Otherwise she made no sign.

'You seem to have a difficulty in getting those walnuts out of their shells,' said Mr. Antony. 'Let me assist you. And yet you ought to be able to manage them easily enough now, so late in the season. For myself, I never care for walnuts after Christmas. I get tired of them.'

'Do you? I tell Franks to bring them every day as long as they last. One can employ oneself over them so conveniently. They are as good as fancy-work for getting rid of time. How are your strawberries getting on? In blossom yet?'

'Just. I shall have fruit by the end of April.'

'Then you are in advance of us. But I don't care much about having things so early. They always taste better if you wait for them until their proper season.'

'Oh, Lady Lowater,' said Miss Pentwistle, 'how can you think so? I think half the flavour of fruit depends on getting it before other people. I always have a feeling of superiority when I am eating anything six months before its time. Why, when the gardener brings us grapes in May, I declare I feel almost as if I belonged to the aristocracy.'

Mr. Antony, helping himself to a glass of port, laughed a short, dry laugh. It might be at Miss Pentwistle's frequently-expressed adoration for the upper classes.

'I believe some of them have no better patent than yours, if that is all, Miss Pentwistle.'

Mr. Antony was looking at Miss Pent-

wistle as he began this sentence. He finished with a steady glance at Lady Lowater, accompanied by a precise and careful bow as he took his first sip of the wine.

With the faintest possible inclination of the head, my lady dropped her beautiful eyelids. That was all the notice she took.

'I hope you have good news of Sir Merrion, Lady Lowater.'

'Many thanks, yes. He is quite well.'

'And hopes soon to be on his way home, I suppose. I think I heard some time ago that he proposed taking furlough in April or May.'

'Yes, in April or May. That is, if—yes, in April or May, I suppose.'

'Lady Lowater,' said Miss Pentwistle, 'will you not let me pick the walnuts for you? You know I nearly always do it.'

'Lady Lowater is very independent, Miss Pentwistle,' said Mr. Antony. 'You have just heard her refuse my assistance. I must say I like to pick my own walnuts too. And, when Sir Merrion comes home, I suppose it will be to look for a wife.'

'My son will please himself in that,' said Lady Lowater.

'Of course—of course. A man who does anything else in such matters is not worth a lady's attention. At the same time, he lingers long. And now that he has the title——'

Here Mr. Antony again looked towards my lady, but she would not so much as lift her eyes. Only the sparkles came and went more rapidly than ever on her fingers and at her throat. Miss Pentwistle, however, could not resist both looking and replying. The opportunity was too tempting, and ever since the uninvited guest appeared she had been longing to put in a word about his own matrimonial prospects.

'Nay, Mr. Antony,' she said, with a glance intended to be partly mischievous and partly reproachful. 'It is you who are lingering long. But we have heard that you intend to amend that fault. Have we not, Lady Lowater?'

Lady Lowater lifted her eyebrows a little. That was all. But she managed to express both indifference and contempt in doing so. Miss Pentwistle did not notice either, and continued,

'Mrs. Petipase told me all about it this very morning. And she says the wedding is to be in about a month. Now, we only want you to contradict it, if you can.'

'Miss Pentwistle, I would not do anything so rude, and especially when Mrs. Petipase has told you. That excellent lady is right, for once in her life. I am contemplating marriage.'

Lady Lowater's companion gave a start of genuine surprise. Most men beat about the bush a little before openly owning to matrimonial intentions. Was he making game of her?

'Mr. Antony, now do be serious. Of course gentlemen are all contemplating matrimony, more or less. But are you going to be married? That is what I mean.'

'Yes, yes,' said Lady Lowater, impatiently. 'Tell us all about it, if the thing is really going to happen. And, as there is nothing like being prompt in matters of business, what would you like for a wedding present? An ormolu timepiece, or a dish of strawberries six months before their season, or a handsome family Bible?

Mr. Antony smiled. He could afford to do so when my Lady Lowater lost her temper with him. There was nothing but the most scrupulous politeness in his tones as he answered.

'One values a marriage-gift as the giver has put something of herself into it, Lady Lowater.'

'Exactly,' said Miss Pentwistle, who had made up her mind to give him a cigar-case, with a forget-me-not embroidered upon it. 'And one cannot put oneself into a Bible.'

'No,' said the lawyer. 'The only thing is to put the Bible into oneself."

Miss Pentwistle drew herself up. This was trifling with sacred subjects. Lady Lowater flung aside a bad walnut, and said, impatiently,

'Is the lady handsome, Mr. Antony? That is the most important thing.'

'Very handsome indeed, Lady Lowater. It was necessary that she should supplement my deficiencies in that direction.'

'That was my own idea; but of course I would not express it. And fascinating, too?'

'That goes without saying. Otherwise, the results could not have been what they are.'

'Oh! yes, they could, if there had been plenty of money. However, we will not go into that question. Beauty and wit are enough. It is well to believe oneself worthy of so choice a combination. And of course you have asked yourself whether the lady is equally fortunate in her selection? It is not always that a man weighs well with himself whether the giving balances the gift.'

There was scorn and bitterness in Lady Lowater's voice as she said this; more than Miss Pentwistle, bent upon finding out additional particulars about the lady, could discern. Mr. Antony detected both, and smiled. He felt himself in the position of a keeper who is teasing a caged leopard. The creature may flash its beautiful eyes, and show its claws as much as it likes; the bars are there, and the keeper is safe. Besides, he has the key.

'You are severe, Lady Lowater. You might have discovered before this that I am not a man to take unfair advantage of my opportunities. However, the event will prove, and I hope to your satisfaction, that my future wife has not made a mistake in committing her happiness to my keeping.'

Lady Lowater dipped her slender fingertips in the water beside her, and then she took the lemon-leaf which floated on the top, and crushed it through and through, crushed it until there was no shape left in it, then flung it back again.

'Shall we go?' she said, turning to Miss

Pentwistle, and rising. 'Mr. Antony, do you care to come with us now, or will you stay longer over your wine?'

Mr. Antony was on his feet in a moment, and at the door, to hold it open for the ladies.

'If you will permit me, I will join you at once.'

'Certainly,' said my lady, with courteous indifference. 'I can quite imagine you have much to tell us.'

'I have much to tell you,' replied Mr. Antony, laying the slightest possible stress on that last pronoun. And there was still that indefinable something in his manner, of the keeper teasing the leopard, quite lost, however, upon the unperceptive Miss Pentwistle, who replied briskly, as she followed Lady Lowater into the hall,

'I was sure of that, Mr. Antony, from the very first, and we are so anxious to hear all about it. In fact, we have scarcely talked of anything else since we first heard about it, have we, Lady Lowater?'

'Scarcely. But then we only heard just before dinner. At the same time there is nothing which interests idle women like ourselves so much as hearing of a new engagement. One has a sort of cruel pleasure in welcoming another victim into the fatal circle. One knows so well what is to come of it. Don't look so shocked, Miss Pentwistle.'

'Not in the least, dear Lady Lowater,' said Miss Pentwistle, with a touch of propriety nevertheless. 'I quite understand it is only your way of putting things. You always do express yourself with force and originality. I am very sorry if I appeared not to understand you. Mr. Antony, may we ask when the happy event is to take place?'

'You may ask whatever you like,' replied that gentleman, following the ladies into the drawing-room, and drawing Lady Lowater's easy chair to the fire

He stood by until she was comfortably seated, with her fan and her little oddments on a side-table within reach. Then with a shade less of solicitude he waited upon Miss Pentwistle, who appeared rather flurried with the attention. And then he strolled about the room, looking at the pictures.

You may ask whatever you like, Miss Pentwistle, and I will tell you just as much as I think proper. My present intention is to marry Mrs. Dormer, of Hurchester, on the seventeenth of March, exactly one month from the present time.'

'Then you must make a tolerably long wedding-tour, Mr. Antony,' said my lady, 'for I am quite sure the house will not be

ready for her by that time. You have no idea how much a lady requires.'

'Not more, I hope, than I shall be willing to do for her. But we expect to be away for at least six weeks. I have not had a real holiday for a long time.'

'Oh! then it is to be Italy, and all that sort of thing, I suppose. Very charming for Mrs. Dormer, if she has never been there before. Does she know the Continent? Perhaps not.'

Lady Lowater said this spitefully on purpose. Mr. Antony might understand, if he chose, that she did not consider any possible wife of his likely to have been blessed with the liberal education which includes foreign travel in its scope. And Mr. Antony understood, but he only replied, with great calmness,

'Mrs. Dormer has resided for many years in India. You may not know, perhaps, that Captain Dormer was in the —th. Sir Merrion's regiment.'

'I did not. But it would be so very long before Merrion's time that I should not be likely to have heard the name.'

That was another fling, not at Mrs. Dormer's education, but at her middle-agedness. The leopard was getting into a charming state of irritation; but there were the bars, and there was the keeper, and there was the key.

Mr. Antony strolled back to the hearthrug, glanced slightly at Miss Pentwistle, to whom he said, 'I beg your pardon,' and then, taking some papers out of his pocket, turned to Lady Lowater and remarked,

'You will be glad to know how well those telegraph shares are paying just now. I have been thinking that for further sums at present unappropriated——'

Miss Pentwistle was a person of discernment, where the duties of her own position were concerned. Upon seeing the papers she rose, quietly laid aside her little bit of fancy-work, and began to look for something amongst her odds and ends of silk.

'I have forgotten my rose-colour. I must have left it in the morning-room.'

For she knew that Mr. Antony objected, even if Lady Lowater did not, to the presence of a third party when business matters were being discussed. He had made her feel that once or twice very unmistakably. And with a sense of disappointment that for the present, at any rate, they were to hear no more of Mrs. Dormer, she left the room.

CHAPTER XI.

Mr. Antony, watching Miss Pentwistle down the long drawing-room, kept on talking about the telegraph shares until he had heard the door close behind her. Then he seated himself in the chair she had just left, stretched himself out at full length, put his feet on the fender, and looked about for a cushion on which to rest his head. There was one just out of reach.

'Perhaps you would like me to bring it for you,' said Lady Lowater.

'No, thank you. I will help myself. But I should like to tell you that it is no use being so rude to me as you have been this evening. When people stand in the position that you and I do to each other, it is better to keep the peace. At any rate, it is better for the weaker party to keep it.'

Lady Lowater did not reply. She took up the peacock-feather fan from the little table beside her and turned it about, watching its changeful green and gold. Sometimes she looked steadily into the fire. Sometimes she leaned back and closed her eyes. But towards Mr. Antony she never turned. And yet she was his prisoner. Bound there hand and foot, she must listen to what he chose to tell her.

Now that they were alone together, a certain thin film of deference fell off from him. He assumed the air of a man who can do what he pleases. No more was said about the telegraph shares.

'So she has picked it up from Mrs. Petipase,' he began. 'What a keen scent women have in these things! They find out everything.'

'Yes,' said my lady, bitterly. 'One may as well try to hide one's sins.'

'One's sins, indeed!' and Mr. Antony shrugged his shoulders. 'One can hide them. At least, some people contrive to do it for a tolerably long time.'

'Not from themselves. And not from those who have the power to punish the sins. You have made me feel that miserably enough. But I offer you my congratulations.'

'What, upon being able to make you feel your sins?'

'Just as you please. I was thinking of your approaching marriage. I suppose you will wish me to pay some attention to Mrs. Antony?'

'Just as you please. It will probably be a matter of more importance to yourself than to me how you behave to her. She is, however, a lady.'

'Poor thing, then!'

Mr. Antony only stretched himself out a little more easily.

'Yes, you have often given me to understand that I am no gentleman; but I always admired good-breeding in other people, and I have always determined that, when I married, my wife should be a woman of family. She must better me in that respect.'

'I hope she will better you in other more important ones, Mr. Antony.'

'Thank you. As you imply, I am not perfect. At the same time, it is scarcely yourself who should say so.'

Lady Lowater just turned in the direction of Mr. Antony, but she did not so

much as lift her eyelids. What she had to express was told in a slight curl of the fine upper lip. And then slowly she turned her head away again.

'Well, madam,' said Mr. Antony, losing his own temper at last, 'I think we have had enough of this. I came to tell you that I have heard of Theodore, and he is not dead. What have you to say to that?'

'Nothing at all, Mr. Antony.'

He looked at her for awhile in silence.

You women are curious creatures. One never knows where to find you. Well, instead of being dead, Theodore is prospering in San Francisco, and he sends me word he is about to be married.'

'Really.' This was said with perfect calmness.

'He says it is the first time he has known what it is to be fascinated by a

woman since—since five-and-twenty years ago.'

Mr. Antony fixed his eyes upon as much as Lady Lowater would let him see of her face. She swept the peacock's feathers to and fro upon her fingers, saying, quietly,

'I wish it was the first time he had ever been fascinated at all.'

'I daresay you do, now. But things that have been done cannot be undone. However, I have no wish to injure you.'

'Thank you. You have told me that before.'

'Yes, but the time may come when I shall give over telling you it, if you behave to me in that cool, contemptuous way. It is not quite the thing to do for a woman in your position.'

Lady Lowater now turned and looked him full in the face.

'Mr. Antony, the soul that sinneth it shall die. I have been finding that out for the last five-and-twenty years. Is not that enough for you? Perhaps there are some souls that sin and die and never know anything about it. Whether theirs is a better case than mine, I cannot tell. This I do know, that nothing you can tell me now, can put a blacker blackness into my life.'

'What, not if I tell your brave boy Merrion all that I know?'

A cramp of terror passed through the icy contempt of Lady Lowater's face, and she said, with a half tone of pleading in her voice,

'You could not do that. No, you could not do that. Merrion is all I have in the whole world to love me now.'

And she shut her eyes over the tears, just a moment, no more. For this man to

see that his thrusts could reach her heart, was almost the worst of all. Mr. Antony gave himself another stretch.

'I could do anything that I liked, but that does not imply that I mean to do it. Those haughty Abington people have not been so particularly pleasant to me that I should put the estate into their hands, for the sake of revenging myself upon you. I have no wish to damage either Merrion or yourself. Only as he is coming home so soon, you may as well give him a caution. If he does not mend his manners to me this time, I shall have some difficulty to keep from telling him who and what he is.'

'I have always told him to pay proper respect to you, Mr. Antony.'

'Proper respect, indeed! What sort of respect do you call it when a young fellow puts you on the same level as his bailiff?—

either tries not to see you in the street at all, or passes you with such a nod as he would give to a confidential servant. I suppose by-and-by when he brings home a wife, I shall be told to keep myself at a respectful distance. A respectful distance from my own nephew, ha! ha! very fine indeed! Merrion has not a particle of the Lowater blood in his veins, but he has considerably more than his share of the Lowater pride. And he very strongly tempts me sometimes to pull it down for him.'

'I will speak to him, Mr. Antony, when he comes home. I assure you that, as far as I can prevent it, there shall be nothing offensive in his conduct to you. Only have pity upon him—and upon me.'

'Yes, it's all very well to talk about having pity. You first of all flout a man for not being independent, and then, when he does assert himself, you go into hysterics about that too. So long as Merrion treats me like a gentleman, he is safe. When he begins to be insolent, let him look out. And I understand you will call upon Mrs. Antony.'

'I intend to call upon her.'

'And if you think that I am going to make her acquainted with anything that may be dangerous to your own position here, you are quite mistaken. I am not one of those simpletons who go and tell their wives everything. I keep my own affairs to myself, and I shall keep yours and Merrion's too, so long as proper consideration is shown to me. But if you get on to your scornful tack, especially in the presence of other people, you must take the consequences. A man can bear a good many things, but when it comes to being scoffed at and flouted, why, then he had better show his power.'

Lady Lowater looked wearily towards the door. If only Miss Pentwistle would come back. Mr. Antony did not understand. To do him credit, he was ignorant of the suffering he was inflicting. His only idea of humiliation was that which affected one's position in society. To do wrong, so long as people did not find it out, was a trifle. As for the self-respect whose loss is the sorest calamity which can come upon a human soul, he knew nothing of it, and was content in his ignor-To get on in life and be well thought of was what he had set before himself

'The room is rather chill,' he said, 'but it isn't because Miss Pentwistle has left the door open. Somehow, this house never does seem to get properly warmed through. It is arranged, then, that you call upon Mrs. Antony. As I said before, she is quite a lady.'

This time Lady Lowater did not allow herself to be bitter. Instead, she was silent.

'Quite a lady,' he continued. 'I assured myself of that before I committed myself to any final arrangements. My chief object in marrying at all, is to secure that position which a man can only attain when a lady of birth and breeding is at the head of his establishment. Mrs. Dormer is, as I daresay Miss Pentwistle has found out from Mrs. Petipase, the widow of an officer in the army.'

'Yes, I think Miss Pentwistle told me as much as that. At the same time, I shall not call upon her for any reason but that you have married her, and that you wish me to get her introduced into the upper-class society about here.'

'Very well. If you choose to put it in that way, I have no objection. And I wish you to understand that, so long as I am behaved to by yourself and Merrion with courtesy, I shall not say anything that would in any way affect your position. And, as I was saying to you before, as regards that small amount of unappropriated capital——'

For at this moment Miss Pentwistle, thinking that time enough had been given for the business interview, made her appearance, after a little preliminary rustling and fidgetting at the door.

'As regards that small amount of unappropriated capital, there could be no more eligible investment for it than those telegraph shares which, as my London agent tells me, are rising so steadily in the market. So we may consider everything as satisfactorily settled.'

'I hope so.'

Her ladyship said it very quietly. And

as Miss Pentwistle returned to the chair which Mr. Antony, as soon as he heard her step at the door, had vacated for her, she never so much as suspected that anything touching the mistress of Lowater Court more nearly than the yearly gain or loss of a few pounds had been discussed that evening.

CHAPTER XII.

Just one month later, the Byborough Chronicle informed its readers that Mr. Antony, of the Elms, was married to Bettina, widow of Captain Dormer of the—th. And, after a further interval of six weeks, the newly-married couple made their appearance at the parish church of Lowater.

Lady Lowater always sat with her back to the congregation, and, as Ben Dyson often remarked to his daughter Margaret, sat as still as any of the stone statues in the chancel. Let a careless Sunday scholar drop his prayer-book, or a sleepy one tumble off the bench with a thump loud enough to waken the seven sleepers, or a gust of wind bang the easement windows down the north aisle, or Mr. Guaritch's resonant bass strike upon a wrong note and put the whole choir out of tune, my lady never took the least notice. It was her duty to go to church, and sit still; and she went to church, and sat still, nobody stiller, and there was an end.

So none of the stone Lowaters in the chancel were quieter than was the flesh and blood one in the chantry pew, when a waft of subtle perfume, and a rustle of raiment, and a general turning of feminine heads, proclaimed the arrival of the bridal party from the Elms. But Miss Pentwistle sat where she could see everything, the solicitor's pew best of all; and not a thread of Mrs. Antony's wedding raiment, or a touch of Mrs. Antony's wedding behaviour escaped her notice.

Those were the days when newly-married people came to church according to their position. Orange blossoms and white satin ribbons had indeed disappeared into the free seats, where brides of the working classes exhibited themselves in such array. but a certain deference to custom in the matter of paler shades than usual, and a veil not raised during service, and a general manifestation of downcast consciousness, was expected from even the upper classes; and, as a rule, was paid. Accordingly, though the time was only towards the end of April, and people had scarcely cast their winter garments, Mrs. Antony made her appearance as a middle-aged bride, in lavender silk, and a bonnet to match, becomingly clouded over with tulle. And Mr. Antony carried upon his arm the dainty little ermine tippet which had been dispensed with at the

church-door, etiquette requiring that, under such circumstances, no outward wraps should mar the general effect of the toilette. Indeed, as a rule, newlymarried people of a less exalted position came to church in a fly, in order that nothing might get out of order on the road, and that they might be able to walk up the aisle with no disagreeable consciousness of bonnet-strings awry, or veils on one side, or scarves out of perpendicular. But, at the time of Mr. Antony's marriage, the upper classes had begun to make a point of walking to church on the first Sunday of their appearance, Lady Belleray's daughter having set the example only a year before.

'About forty-two or three, I should say,' said Miss Pentwistle, as, during the Sunday mid-day dinner, she gave Lady Lowater the benefit of her observations.

'Perhaps a touch more; with those fair, small people you can never tell exactly.'

'Mrs. Antony is fair, then?' said my lady, glancing down towards the mirror which was framed in the sideboard at the end of the room. It told her that she had been fair once, very fair; but that was long ago. To see the deep lines now, and the colourless cheeks, and the mist of silver-grey brooding upon the hair, and the story of hopeless weariness which those unlighted eyes had to tell, one could scarcely have thought that youth and fairness had ever belonged to the face at all. Mrs: Antony most likely had pleasanter memories to support her good looks upon.

'Fair, did you say, and small?'

'Yes. Not particularly small, but just a little under-sized, enough to make her match Mr. Antony nicely. I do so dislike to see a tall man towing along a great, strapping woman. And she has very pretty, fluffy hair, and tolerably good features, not exactly what I should call distinguished-looking; but then, one does not always find an aristocratic contour, even amongst quite the upper classes.'

'I suppose you would say she is pretty, then, rather than handsome?'

'Yes, that is just what I should say. But as for her dress, it was simply perfect.'

'That is interesting,' said her ladyship, with another weary look into the mirror. 'Now, Miss Pentwistle, let us have your description of a perfect toilette.'

'Well.' And Miss Pentwistle's face began to assume an expression of internal recollectedness, as when she was setting forth the heads of an interesting sermon, not one of Mr. Rock's. 'The very loveliest shade of lavender cashmere. Oh!

Lady Lowater, it was a pity you did not so much as turn round to look at it, trimmed with little frillings and flutings of satin the same colour; made with tight sleeves, and a puff at the top-you see, being slight, she can carry off a puff well; the bodice round, with a band and buckle; a soft white China crape shawl draped prettily about her shoulders—quite a little one, you know, really not much more than a kerchief-fastened on one side with easy negligence, instead of being drawn down into tight lines; no expensive lace about her, I took particular notice of that, but any quantity of tulle frilling about her neck and wrists; gloves exactly the same shade as the dress, with two buttons.'

'Miss Pentwistle! What a memory!
And there is all the bonnet to come yet.'

'The bonnet was lovely, perfectly lovely, dear Lady Lowater,' said Miss Pentwistle,

too much interested in her subject to note this passing tribute to her powers of recollection. 'French felt to match the dress, bound with satin, and marabout tips on one side, and rather a deep curtain, and a bit of white lilac in the border; no orange-blossom, of course, being a second marriage. And a delicate tulle veil, hemstitched with floss silk. I do assure you nothing could have been more becoming and at the same time simple.'

'Then I am to understand that you have fallen in love with Mrs. Antony.'

'Oh, dear, no, nothing of the sort. Indeed, I can see quite plainly that she is just the woman to make a man marry her, whether he will or not; most beguiling and persuasive in her manners.'

'My dear Miss Pentwistle, how could you find out anything about that in church?'

'Quite well. I could tell it from the way she took her books from Mr. Antony, when he had found the places for her, and how she edged Miss Dormer a little way to one side, when she wanted to get out of the sun. All elegance and softness, and, you may depend upon it, will never sit on the draughty side of a room when there is anyone else to occupy the place. And she waited for her husband to pick up everything that she dropped. Indeed, I believe she let things fall on purpose, for they seemed to be always going. A woman that means to live up to her privileges in every respect. Oh! no, thank you. I shall not fall in love with her. At the same time, I consider her a most fascinating person.'

'You will fall in love with her, then, if she makes up her mind that you shall do so.' 'I might, perhaps, if she were not Mr. Antony's wife,' said Miss Pentwistle, with a far-off—a very far-off—reminder of co-quettishness; just a hint of the charming constancy which retains, for every man who has made it an offer, enough preference to be vexed when he marries some one else.

Lady Lowater could not help smiling. The whole thing sat so badly upon the precise, mathematical woman of well over forty, with her equi-distant ringlets and her severity of line and angle and perpendicular. But Miss Pentwistle would never forget that she might once upon a time, according to common parlance, have 'had' Mr. Antony.

'Oh! Miss Pentwistle, you will soon forgive her for marrying him. I would make him welcome to any woman who will tyrannise over him as this soft, persuasive little wife seems likely to do. But, if she has no good lace, I don't feel a bit interested in her. Why did Mr. Antony tell us she was a woman of family? I expected Venetian point at the very least. And on the first Sunday of her appearance at church, too. You say it was nothing but tulle. Does he suppose we are going to accept a distinguished pedigree on the foundation of tulle frilling? No, no. I may perhaps stretch a point and give up the old Venetian, but if she has aristocratic blood in her veins we must have Mechlin. Are you sure, Miss Pentwistle, that she had not a bit of Mechlin about her, somewhere or other?'

'Not a vestige,' gravely replied Miss Pentwistle, who did not easily take-in a joke, and for whom old lace or old family butlers, or indeed anything that indicated ancient descent, was as sacred as a point of doctrine. 'I assure you it was nothing but tulle. But then, you see, it was almost obliged to'be that, to match the veil. Mrs. Antony is evidently a woman who understands dress thoroughly. She knows it would not do to put lace in one place and tulle in another.'

'No, Miss Pentwistle, especially when providence has settled the matter for her by disposing of the lace in another direction. I am inclined to think that her pedigree only dates back to the days of tulle.'

'The days of Thule?' asked Miss Pentwistle, with a serious air. 'Who was he? I never heard of him. Was he a Scottish king?'

Lady Lowater only laughed.

'No. I think they manufacture him somewhere in France, but I am not sure. At any rate, people who depend upon him for their respectability have not much to boast of.

'Well, then, my dear Lady Lowater, she cannot be descended from him, because you know Mr. Antony said she was of superior birth.'

'And would you not call anyone of superior birth, Miss Pentwistle, who was descended from a king, even if he was only the king of Tulle.'

'Well, yes. Royal blood is a great thing. Perhaps we might become intimate enough with her some day to ask her about it.'

'Speak for yourself about the intimacy,' said Lady Lowater, with a sort of careless pride in her tone. 'I don't feel that it is a matter which concerns me. You had better take it for granted that Mr. Antony could marry none but a lady of royal descent. I propose we go into

the drawing-room and discuss the subject there.

'Certainly,' said Miss Pentwistle. 'I do feel very much interested in it.'
And they went.

CHAPTER XIII.

'Now, my dear Lady Lowater,' she said, when they were comfortably seated by the fire, 'do not go to sleep till I have told you a little more. You know we do not have a wedding-party every Sunday. You said you should expect me to take notice of everything for you, and what is the use of doing so if you do not care to hear about it.'

'My dear Miss Pentwistle, I never said I did not care to hear. But I don't think Argus himself with his hundred or thousand eyes, or however many he has, could have seen more of her dress than you have

described, and we have already come to the conclusion that she is descended from that French or Scottish monarch, and what more is there to talk about?'

'A great deal. My own mind is not clear about the pedigree being so distinguished as you seem to think, though at the same time she is no doubt quite a lady. Mrs. Petipase knows some one who visits at Hurchester, where she comes from, and this some one happened to call once, the lady whom she visits knowing Mrs. Antony when she was Mrs. Dormer. And she says everything was in the most simple style, but still, you know, quite proper. Captain Dormer seems to have left her not very well provided for, but she is one of those women who will keep up her position whatever else she has to drop.'

'I see. It does not slip out of her fingers so easily as the fans and pockethandkerchiefs and things that keep going down in church. Well—I like a woman to remember what she once was, even if it has to be nothing *but* remembrance.'

'So do I. Mrs. Petipase's friend said she believed Mrs. Dormer would rather live on bread-and-cheese for a week than open the front door herself if anyone called, or be seen carrying a brown paper parcel in the street. Now I admire that spirit.'

'I don't. I thought you were going to say she remembered in quite a different way. I can't understand how it affects a lady's position for her to be seen carrying a brown paper parcel.'

'I daresay not, because it would not affect yours at all. Why, you might carry your own tea-kettle to the blacksmith's to be mended, and, if anybody happened to see you, they would only say it was your

ladyship's eccentricity. But, if I were to do such a thing, they would say it was my poverty, and I would much rather be thought eccentric than poor.'

'Well, whoever I was, and wherever I happened to be, I would carry my own tea-kettle to the blacksmith's if I had a mind to do so, and people might say what they liked about it. That is my way of thinking, Miss Pentwistle.'

'That is because you do not know what it is to be anybody else but what you are. You are Lady Lowater, and you can do what you like. Everybody knows all about you.'

Her ladyship smiled a very weary smile. The ignorance of people was a great blessing. One must be thankful for it, as well as for the knowledge which, stopping where it did, allowed her to carry her own tea-kettle, if she were so minded.

'Well,' she said, 'I was always told when I was a child that poverty was no disgrace.'

'No disgrace, but one of the worst things a woman can own to, if she wishes to keep up a position. However, Mrs. Dormer will not have to beat her sixpences out to the size of half-crowns, now that she is Mrs. Antony. It is the daughter who will have to do that. She is as different as can be from her mother. One would never think that they belonged to each other'

'Was Miss Dormer at church, too?'

'Lady Lowater, to think of your never seeing so much as that!'

'Why should I look, when you see enough for us both? And I never turn round to look at people. That shows worse breeding than poverty. Now, of course, where you sit, you cannot look at

anything but the people. What about Miss Dormer, then? Is she going to live at the Elms, too?'

'Oh! dear, no. Mr. Antony told me that himself. I met him yesterday, as I was going through the village, and, you know, when a man is really married, you can ask him questions more comfortably. He says she has just come for a month or so, to help her mamma to receive callers, and then she is going back to Hurchester, where she intends to live.'

'Oh! then she has an independence?'

'No, nothing of the sort. Mrs. Petipase told me that. She earns her living, you know, as a trained nurse. She used to live with her mother, and go to the hospital every day; but now she is to be one of the regular staff of indoor nurses. Mr. Antony says he did propose her staying with them for an indefinite time, but she preferred being somewhere on her own account.'

'And very rightly too. I admire her for it. And now tell me what she is like —I don't mean as regards dress, but herself.'

'Well, really, Lady Lowater, herself is all that there is to say anything about. I could not describe her dress, except that it was something dark, which seemed to bring out the elegance of the other. She is perhaps as good-looking as her mother, only in a different way—good, clear complexion, brown eyes, neat, straight brown hair, but not a bit of grace nor persuasiveness about her; goes right in at the pewdoor, and right out again, you know, without any sort of undulation or swaying about, just a little too straightforward.'

'I understand. Does not look as if she was perpetually walking through a quad-

rille. Mrs. Antony does, I suppose. Well, I rather like people to walk as if they were going somewhere, especially in church.'

'Lady Lowater, you are laughing at me, but you know perfectly well what I mean. There is a sort of ease and grace in moving about, which is especially becoming in a woman, and Mrs. Antony has it to perfection. Just a sway which never catches itself on corners, nor runs up against anything. Now if Miss Dormer had not measured the size of the pew doorway, she must have caught somewhere, she went so straight through.'

'I don't like her any the worse for that, especially as you say she went into an uncomfortable seat in order that her mother might have a comfortable one. I think it was Mr. Antony who ought to have done that. And it is quite decided that she is not to live at the Elms.'

'Quite. One could hardly expect a gentleman to marry both ladies.'

'Certainly not, Miss Pentwistle, I am surprised at your suggesting such a thing. A lady of your well-known propriety.'

'Well, then, making a home for both. That was what I meant. I almost think if I had been Miss Dormer, I would not have come at all, under the circumstances. It looks as if she were coming to see what sort of a home it is, before she decides whether to stay or not.'

'I thought you said it was decided that she should not stay. Mr. Antony told you so himself.'

'Oh! dear, yes, so he did. Well, then, it looks like that, but it cannot be that. We shall see how things turn out. I know if I were Miss Dormer, I would much rather live at a pretty place like the Elms, and make myself generally useful, than

slave away at the Hurchester hospital under a lady superintendent. But she is evidently a girl not cut out for society. One can see that from her manner.'

'Too straightforward, I suppose. Not enough deportment.'

'You have expressed it exactly, Lady Lowater. Not enough deportment.'

'Well, then, I have made up my mind to like her. I almost wish I had turned round in church. To see a girl without anything that deserves the name of deportment, would be so refreshing. One gets tired of always seeing people walk through quadrilles. Have you heard her name?'

'Yes. A rather uncommon one. Valence.'

'Valence. It is rather pretty, only it reminds one too much of window draperies, and those things that go round the tops of beds. And Valenciennes lace too. I suppose she did not wear any, to supplement her mother's deficiencies.'

'Oh! dear no. Miss Dormer is a person you could scarcely think of in connection with such a thing as lace. Nothing but linen, linen collar, linen cuffs; where her mother had heaps of ruffles and frillings, she had nothing but a plain band, and where Mrs. Antony was tousled and waved and curled, her daughter was just smoothed back and twisted round in a knot. I should think where it takes one three-quarters-of-an-hour to dress, it takes the other about five minutes.'

'Then I think I shall like the other best.'

Then there was a pause. Miss Pentwistle thought Lady Lowater was going to sleep, but after a little silence she roused up.

'Curious, that Merrion should have come across this girl at Hurchester. I wonder will he remember when I tell him about it?

'Of course. A man does not forget a sprained ankle and a flesh rent which keeps him in hospital for a week. I have heard him speak of it myself, over and over again. It was just at the time of the athletic sports, and that vexed him so.'

'Yes, but I don't mean the accident. I mean will be remember Miss Dormer.'

'Oh! that is a different thing altogether,' said Miss Pentwistle, with a new expression upon her face.

And then there was another pause, and Lady Lowater leaned back. Surely she was going to sleep this time.

Perhaps she might be. She sat there with her eyes shut for at least a quarter of an hour. And then she said.

- 'Did not some one say Captain Dormer was in the —th?'
- 'I believe so,' said Miss Pentwistle, this time with just a touch of ill-temper.
- 'Merrion's regiment. Things do get jumbled together curiously. But, as I said, that must be a long time ago—many years.'

And then she added,

'Mr. Antony seems to think that Merrion will be sure to look for a wife when he comes home.'

CHAPTER XIV.

Miss Pentwistle was a righteous woman, and prided herself upon doing her duty according to the directions of the catechism. She taught that catechism every Sunday in her class for an hour, before morning service; and she could hear the whole of it, from beginning to end, without feeling that one point of its fine, clear, wholesome moral precept penetrated any of the points of her armour. She honestly believed that she loved her neighbour as herself. She also believed that her duty to that neighbour was duly practised, and, in support of that belief, she could point to the fact that during the fifteen years or

more that she had been under Lady Lowater's roof, she had never so much as picked up a pin, or taken a lump of sugar that did not belong to her, without duly notifying the fact to the mistress of the house. Therefore if she could not speak about keeping one's hands from picking and stealing, who could? As for lying and evil speaking, none could accuse her of either. She never said anything which she did not believe to be true. Of course, if a thing was true it ought to be spoken, and she spoke it accordingly. Then as for learning and labouring truly to earn her own living in that state of life to which Providence had called her, she had done it, and with the respect of her employers, too, ever since, leaving school at the age of sixteen, she had gone into a clergyman's family as nursery-governess on twelve pounds a year.

If anybody could teach the Church Catechism that person was herself, and she felt comfortable accordingly.

And yet, with those last words spoken by Lady Lowater, there fell just the smallest drop of acid into the double-distilled purity of her motives. She sat there thinking, thinking. And her thoughts were not thoughts of peace.

Sir Merrion Lowater might come home now almost at any time. Miss Dormer was staying with her mother at the Elms, within a quarter of an hour's walk of Lowater Court. She and Sir Merrion had met not so very long ago, under circumstances which place a girl in the most attractive light. He had been brought into her ward at the hospital with a smashed ankle which kept him there for a week, before he could be safely removed to the barracks. That was a better way for two

young people to become acquainted than meeting at any number of balls, picnics, or private theatricals. He was evidently impressed by her, by the way in which he had mentioned her skill and kindness. She herself, also, had most unwittingly happened to describe Miss Dormer in a manner which had awakened Lady Lowater's interest. No words of hers could now alter that first impression. She read the yet unspoken thought in the mother's heart. The names of Valence Dormer and Sir Merrion had glided together there.

Could it be possible? Could the proud Lady Lowater indeed desire such a match for her only child? Valence Dormer, the hospital nurse, the brown-eyed, independent-looking, straightforward young girl, who had never in all her life known what luxury was, whose dress told of stinted means, whose bearing and manner had that practical, unadorned common-sense which only comes of necessary daily work, was she to be the future Lady Lowater, while others, who had for years gone on in their quiet, patient round of service, were left in an entirely subordinate position? It was too much. One might believe the catechism as faithfully as ever, and not be able to sit down meekly under such a condition of things.

Then, if Sir Merrion married, and his mother remained at the Court, as she had said he wished her to remain, would she need a companion any longer? Especially if the new wife became a favourite. That threw another light, or rather shadow, upon the matter. One could not always command a hundred a year, together with such absolute freedom as Lady Lowater's companion enjoyed. Contrasted with the position of

Sir Merrion's wife—a position which Miss Pentwistle beheld in imagination occupied by Valence Dormer—the companionship was a very poor thing, a very poor thing indeed. But, contrasted with most other situations which a not very highly-educated woman could hope for, it showed with great advantage; in fact, it was not likely to be bettered.

Miss Pentwistle, sitting there by the drawing-room fire that Sunday afternoon, thinking such thoughts as these, was naturally anxious to know what Lady Lowater would say next. The last two remarks she had made, coming as they did after intervals of thoughtful silence, had been very suggestive. She was evidently quite serious in what she said. Miss Pentwistle knew as well as could be the difference between Lady Lowater's bitter, sneering, satirical manner when

she had a bilious attack, or an attack of some other kind, and her quiet way of discussing possibilities when she was in a pleasant mood, at least, an earnest mood. She was earnest now. Such being the case, much depended upon her next remark

It was not such as to remove the weight which lay upon Miss Pentwistle's mind. Lady Lowater opened her eyes. They were full, not of slumber, but of wakeful purpose; and she said,

'Miss Pentwistle, I have made up my mind to call upon Mrs. Antony.'

The very last thing in the world she ought to have made up her mind to do. But one must not oppose it too violently.

'My dear Lady Lowater, how kind of you! I am sure Mrs. Antony could not expect anything of the sort. She would have great reason to feel herself fortunate,

if you allowed me to take your card and a courteous message; but to call in person!'

'Oh, no, I shall take it myself. I promised—at least, as I said before, I have made up my mind. If I pay her a little attention, the rest of the people about here will do the same.'

Miss Pentwistle thought she understood. Getting the family into a good position before Sir Merrion married into it. If her ladyship made up her mind to a thing, she would carry it through.

'Well, I can only say you are very kind. I am sure she could not expect anything of the sort from you.'

Lady Lowater's lip curled slightly.

'It is not a matter of expecting. I don't suppose for a moment Mr. Antony would exaggerate matters so far as to give her to understand that the county people would call upon his wife.'

That was better. Miss Pentwistle caught that up eagerly. It was only going to be condescension, then.

'Of course not. If she is received kindly by the middle-class families, it is all she can look for. She will no doubt be very proud to have your card lying upon the top of the rest, but it would be folly to think of anything more.'

'As to that Miss Pentwistle, it may be as it likes. I shall call in person, and, having called, I shall invite her to the house. Then I shall have done my duty.'

'And a very great deal more than your duty, my dear Lady Lowater, in my humble opinion. For anything you know, she may be a person who will presume upon that sort of thing. There are women who, if once they get a footing, will never let you shake them off again. Now it strikes me——'

'Never mind. I shall call upon Mrs. Antony some day this week.'

And, when Lady Lowater said a thing in that way, it had to be left.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS PENTWISTLE turned the matter over again in her own mind. The more she thought of it, the more unpleasant it seemed. Truly this was an unquiet Sunday afternoon. Then she asked a question.

'Shall you leave a card, too, for Miss Dormer?'

'Certainly. I am very glad to have it in my power to pay her that attention. I shall do it out of consideration for my son. I look upon him as under an obligation to Miss Dormer.'

'Oh! Lady Lowater, now that is too

ridiculous. Why, she only did her duty. You know a nurse is expected to do her best for all the patients who come into her ward.'

'Yes, and in doing it she places each one of them under an obligation which cannot easily be repaid. I don't think people can ever be too thankful for the care and skill which give them back to their daily work. It is not money which settles a matter of that kind.'

'To my mind it would, Lady Lowater.

And the consciousness that I had done
my duty in my own proper sphere would
always be sufficient for me.'

Miss Pentwistle said this with dignity, as from a lofty moral platform.

'I have no doubt it is sufficient for Miss Dormer too,' replied her ladyship. 'At the same time, I also must have the sufficiency of doing my duty. And you say there is something very frank and pleasant and straightforward about her. We may perhaps find that we have done well for ourselves by cultivating her acquaintance, even if we only look at it as a matter of giving and taking.'

'Did I say she was frank and pleasant? I am really not quite sure. There was certainly a straightforwardness in her manners. But then I naturally took more notice of Mrs. Antony. And one must not hastily pronounce a judgment upon character.'

'No, but one may upon characteristics. And what you said of Miss Dormer aroused my interest. I certainly do like frank, unaffected people.'

Miss Pentwistle fidgeted a little. What a pity she had said anything at all about Miss Dormer! And then she replied, dubiously,

Did I say frank and unaffected? Well, I really forget. Now I come to think about it, perhaps, if one wished to be complimentary, one would speak of her manner as frank and unaffected. And then, again, if one wanted to convey a different impression, one might say, with just as much truth, that she was brusque and awkward. You see, it all depends upon the way of putting things.'

'Exactly. I understand. Probably a girl who would walk as straight through any of your pet prejudices as she did through the pew doorway. Well, I am not quite sure that I don't like even that better than the undulating gracefulness which never honestly touches anything. At any rate, you thought she would be pleasanter to deal with than her mother, did you not?'

'Oh! well, you know,' said poor Miss

Pentwistle, finding the road difficult between her desire not to praise the young lady too much and her equally strong desire to preserve her own reputation for discernment of character, 'one must not pronounce decidedly upon such slender opportunities of observation. The mother and daughter are perfect opposites; but they may be that, and yet neither exactly what we could wish her to be.'

'You are a discreet person, Miss Pentwistle. I see you will not commit yourself to an opinion. For my own part, I am prepared to like this Valence Dormer very much; but we will make our call, and then say more about it. You say she still follows the occupation of a trained nurse?'

'Yes—under the lady superintendent of the Hurchester Hospital.'

'Then I shall get her to go and see

Margaret Dyson. I believe a good, intelligent nurse can be of more use to a consumptive patient than the doctor himself. I am sure Miss Dormer could give her many useful hints, or, at any rate, she could give them to Mrs. Shorrocks. I have told Mrs. Shorrocks she is to go in for a couple of hours every morning, and do what she can in the cottage. Margaret is not fit now for any sort of household work.'

'Mrs. Shorrocks? Oh! yes, the woman who keeps house for Mr. Rock. Dear Lady Lowater, how kind you are! What a boon to the poor thing!'

'Beautifully kind,' said Lady Lowater, quietly. 'As if, when a woman had caught her death by standing on your own damp stone passages, it was not your duty to see that she died as comfortably as might be, under the circumstances. Mr. Rock

says Mrs. Shorrocks is very good-hearted, and will do faithfully anything that she undertakes.'

'I hope she will. And I hope she will not make too much noise about it. Have you heard her scold and bang when her husband is at home?'

'Yes, and I think I should scold and bang, too, if I had a husband of that sort. A brisk, active, industrious woman who earns a living for two cannot help being rather aggravated with an able-bodied man who does nothing from morning to night but stand about and say what sort of weather he thinks it is going to be.'

'At the same time, Lady Lowater, he has no vices, and goes to church regularly.'

'Oh! dear, no, no vices, except the one of not being energetic enough to earn his own living, which, when you come to think about it, is rather a serious one. Mr. Rock says, if Shorrocks had married a worse woman, he would have been a better man.'

'What a foolish remark, Lady Lowater; but just like Mr. Rock.'

'Not at all. It only shows that Mr. Rock has noticed what is a very difficult problem in human life. An idle man marries an active woman, and he makes her activity do for them both. Now, if he had married a woman like himself, or only a little superior, he must have striven. And so, having some one to crutch him up on every side, he loses the little use he had of his limbs, and becomes a creature scarcely worth despising. One sees it over and over again in all sorts of ways. Unselfish people marry selfish ones, and the selfish one, by being given way to, becomes more grasping than ever; whereas, if she had had a husband who would have made her give up her own will occasionally, she might have had a chance of improving herself.'

'You take for granted it is the wife who does the selfishness. Lady Lowater, that is too bad.'

'Oh! I just used the pronoun as it happened. Most likely it would be the other way. And yet I am not sure. I shall be rather interested, for instance, in seeing how it goes with Mr. and Mrs. Antony. From what you say, they are more equally balanced than most couples.'

'Mrs. Antony will carry the day. I dare venture anything upon that,' said Miss Pentwistle. 'In less than three months Mr. Antony will be as meek and submissive a husband as—oh dear, who can I say, for I don't know any of them about here?'

'Suppose a case then.'

'Well, then, as Mr. Rock would be if he were married. I cannot go further than that. What a model husband that little man would make, if to have some one to do as one liked with was all!'

'Nay then, Miss Pentwistle, you have hit upon the very last person to suit your purpose.'

Miss Pentwistle looked up from the little book of meditations which she always carried about with her on Sundays.

'Do you mean to say, Lady Lowater, that Mr. Rock's wife will not be able to knock him about as much as ever she likes, figuratively speaking, of course.'

'I mean to say there is not a woman within ten miles of Lowater, whom Mr. Rock would find the least difficulty in crumpling up like a piece of old blotting-paper; that is to say, if he took the trouble

to do it. And if you don't know how hard he is, it is only because you have never knocked up against him in the right direction.'

'You do astonish me, Lady Lowater, and I could almost say I am sure you are mistaken. At any rate, I know he has not pulpit power. He has never appealed to me in the least during all these years that I have sat under him. Now, that dear Mr. Crudenay, at St. Anne's, you know, of Perry Point, is a complete master of the sensibilities.'

Lady Lowater laughed scornfully.

'Yes, and that is why his wife's eyes are so red. He is always making her cry.'

'Indeed, Lady Lowater, about the interests of her soul?'

'Oh! dear, no, about the interests of his own stomach. Why, he sulks for a whole

afternoon if she forgets to put nutmeg into the minced veal, and hurls a storm of ill-temper upon her if she does not have lemons at any price for his boiled fowls; and she finds it safer to keep out of his way for a couple of hours if there has been a drop too much essence of almonds in the pudding. And, being a meek, quiet, gentle little woman, that sort of thing tells upon her. I grant you that he is indeed a master of the sensibilities.'

'Lady Lowater, you speak of him in that way because you do not sympathise with his manner of placing the truth before his congregation. It is irritating if a man, especially a man who has to appear much in public, and has a weak digestion, cannot have—'

'If a man has a weak digestion, he had better keep clear of nutmeg, and lemons, and essence of almonds. He should live upon simple food which should profit both his digestion and his temper, besides being pleasanter for his wife, and more economical for the housekeeping. I despise a man who speaks of himself as a pilgrim in a vale of tears, a wayfarer through a waste howling wilderness, but who must have the vale of tears garnished with sliced lemons at any price, and who causes his own part of the wilderness to rejoice with fancy puddings and sweets which have cost his wife whole mornings of tribulation in the kitchen. Talk of self-sacrifice, indeed!'

'We were not talking of it,' said Miss Pentwistle, 'we were talking of Mr. Crudenay's power of stirring the human heart to its depths. But if he is a little particular about his food, you will not deny him the possession of sincere devotion to his duty. Always at the early services.'

'Oh, yes, always,' replied Lady Lowater, who seemed to have fallen into a sarcastic mood this Sunday afternoon, 'and drags the servants out of bed at untimely hours, to get cups of tea ready for him, that he may start comfortably. You may call that devotion if you like, but I know who it is that does the devotion. Why, it was only the other day that I saw Mrs. Crudenay, with a perfect virago of a headache, toiling away amongst the people in her district, and she said she had been obliged to get up so early, for her husband must have hot coffee before he went to the seven o'clock service, and the maid-of-allwork would not stand it, so the wife had to; must struggle all day with pain and weariness and very likely ill-temper too, because it is hard to unite pretty behaviour with a headache, in order that her husband may do his devotion comfortably. Miss Pentwistle, what sort of religion do you call that?'

'Do you mean Mrs. Crudenay's religion? I call it a very faulty one. She always appeared to me to lack the root of the matter.

'No, I don't mean Mrs. Crudenay's religion. I mean her husband's. And if you want roots, I think it is in him that you will find the most plentiful lack of them. But oh, Miss Pentwistle, don't let us talk! We are fools, all of us. Get your prayer-book and go to church. The bells have been ringing this quarter of an hour past.'

Miss Pentwistle rose and put aside her book of meditations.

'I am so sorry for you, Lady Lowater. I do wish you could see things in a different light.'

'So do I. I assure you, when there is a

different light to see them in, I shall rejoice as much as anyone. At present it is all one can do to be patient.'

And you will not go with me to the afternoon service?'

'No, thank you. I will sit still and think my own thoughts.'

And Lady Lowater looked away past the greening elm-trees in the park to the plantation, all bright in its spring beauty now, the plantation where the cruel traps had been set. And, once caught there, it was pain and misery until death.

CHAPTER XVI.

Towards the close of that same week Lady Lowater ordered the carriage for a round of calls.

'The basket as usual, my lady?' said Simmons.

'No, I shall not drive myself this afternoon. Tell Humphreys the landau, and he is to put the pair in.'

'People of that kind always like you to call upon them with plenty of pomp and appearance,' said her ladyship to Miss Pentwistle, when Simmons had taken his orders. 'Now, if it had been the Muchmarches or the Bellerays, the basket would have done quite well; but, being Mrs. Antony, it must be the landau and a pair of horses and a coachman and a footman. You see, when one is going to do a kindness, one may as well do it thoroughly.'

'I am sure it is very good of you,' said Miss Pentwistle, who enjoyed going about in the landau herself, especially when it was a case of the pole, instead of only shafts. After all there was something in a carriage and pair, which lifted one into a higher elevation than a basket. 'You do always seem to know how to do the right thing at the right time. As you say, people like to see a handsome equipage at their gates. It is only a pity there are so few houses within sight of the Elms. I have no doubt Mr. Antony would like the whole parish, to say nothing of Byborough, to see you are calling upon his wife.'

'We will arrange that,' said Lady Lowater.

Accordingly, before going to the Elms at all, she called upon four of the most upper-class people of the neighbourhood, each of whom she informed, in the course of conversation, that she was on her way to Mrs. Antony. And she also informed them that she felt a certain interest in that lady, from the fact of her late husband having been, at the time of his death, a captain in Sir Merrion Lowater's present regiment. Finally, she ordered Humphreys to drive to the newly-fitted house on the Byborough Road, where the solicitor's bride was, as the wedding-cards intimated, at home to receive the congratulations of the neighbourhood, friendly or otherwise.

The smell of paint was still hanging about the place. The sheen of scarcely-

dried varnish asserted itself from every lintel and door-post. All things had an air of newness, especially the feminine fripperies with which the blue-satin drawing-room was plentifully furnished forth, Mrs. Antony herself, in dove-coloured cashmere, to harmonize with the furniture, being the most elegant of the fripperies.

The solicitor's bride was a well-rounded, lovely complexioned woman of an uncertain age, decidedly pretty, though with nothing about her face or manner to indicate good-breeding. But then, Lady Lowater had not expected good-breeding. She was simply calling upon Mr. Antony's wife, and she would have called upon her all the same if Mr. Antony had married her out of a servants' hall, because only by calling upon her, and so keeping friendly with the man who knew the

secrets of her own life, could she keep that brave, handsome son of hers from ruin and disgrace. She could have taken both for herself, and death too; but not for him. And so she shook hands with the piece of plump prettiness which the lawyer had chosen for his portion in life, and never showed by any coldness in touch or manner that the doing so was other than a pleasure.

But, if Mrs. Antony lacked high breeding, she had plenty of the tact and elegance and self-possession which sometimes go for more than good descent. And she had that ready power of adapting herself to circumstances, which, if not so noble, is more useful to a woman in her position than the power of controlling them. She was also one who could make a little go a long way, in matters social as well as domestic, one

who knew at a glance what was the marketable value of any commodity, from a saddle of mutton to a call from a baronet's widow, and would treat it accordingly. Outwardly, she had an air of leisurely, self-satisfied content, but beneath it there might be discerned the sharp running to and fro of a vigilance which was always on the alert, both to keep what she had already gained, and to conquer fresh ground. And now Lady Lowater had called upon her, and that meant being received into the best society of the place. Called too, as she had seen by a rapid glance from the upper windows before the bell rang, in the family carriage, with coachman and footman in full force; and that meant honour, with intention aforethought. This last marriage was going to be a successful one.

'I hope you will not find Lowater very dull after Hurchester,' said my lady, with a sort of careless kindliness, as she descended into an easy-chair, whose brandnew satin crackled and rustled with pride over the unwonted burden it was now for the first time sustaining. 'You know, I think one always misses the amusement of a large town, especially when a regiment is quartered there. You must prepare yourself to find us all excessively dull here.'

Mrs. Antony smiled. And, what was more, the smile brought no crow's-feet to the corners of her eyes, hers being the fair, soft skin which does not take on wrinkles.

'I have certainly been accustomed to plenty of society,' she said, with a cosy, caressing voice, 'but I don't think I shall at all miss it here.'

That might imply either that Mrs. Antony's husband was all-in-all to her, or that to be upon calling terms with Lady Lowater was more profitable than the other advantages, of a miscellaneous and military sort, which Hurchester could afford. Something in the pretty shyness of the manner made both my lady and Miss Pentwistle think it was the charms of Mr. Antony. And Miss Pentwistle felt sharp accordingly. To think that all this blue-satin luxury and devotion might have belonged to herself, had she only been wide enough awake some twenty years before!

'It was very good of you to come and see me,' the new wife continued; 'but I suppose you know that I am entirely a stranger here. And one does feel lonely, especially in the country.'

'Of course,' said my lady, 'and the

place has not got into its summer clothing yet, which makes all the difference. You do not know the neighbourhood much, then?'

'Not at all. Since we left Malta, I have lived all the time at Hurchester, except for one year, when my daughter, Valence Dormer, was training in one of the Belgian hospitals. You know she developed a perfect passion for nursing, and people told me I had better let her follow it.'

'People told you quite right. Anything is better than for a girl to have nothing to do. I remember, years ago, hearing my son speak of Miss Dormer's great skill in her profession. You know he had a nasty accident when his regiment was down at Hurchester, and they took him into Miss Dormer's ward at the hospital there.'

'Oh, yes. Curious, was it not? And to think that I should meet you now!

Valence is devoted to nursing and all that sort of thing. I believe she is perfectly at sea here, because there are no sick people to take care of. I tell her she is never happy unless she is amongst lint and bandages, or propping people up in bed, and helping them to die comfortably.'

'That is a good way of finding one's happiness,' said my lady, with a look of longing in her eyes. 'I don't know whether there is anyone about here now in need of lint and bandages, but there is one who sorely needs helping to die comfortably, and I was very glad when I heard Miss Dormer was with you, because I felt sure she would be glad to do something. It is a poor girl who is dying in consumption. Do you care for visiting sick people?'

Mrs. Antony was not quite certain what to say. One could not walk too warily on unfamiliar ground. Everything depended upon Lady Lowater's own likes and dislikes in such matters. There were people of rank upon whom you could not work more effectually than by telling them you delighted in Dorcas societies and sickvisiting. But then there were others who despised such things as being 'goody,' and would prefer keeping you out of their set if they knew you cared about them.

Now, to which party did Lady Lowater belong? Miss Pentwistle spoke for herself. She carried about with her an atmosphere of tracts and flannel petticoats. One could see that she was cut out for a female curate, a gatherer-in of the poorer classes who were lax about public worship; and perhaps the fact that for the last fifteen years she had been companion to Lady Lowater, might imply that that lady had a leaning towards the same sort of thing. But one could not go upon such

a slender foundation. People of rank were by virtue of that rank committed to a certain amount of benevolence, and it was just possible Lady Lowater might hand hers over to Miss Pentwistle, more for the sake of getting rid of trouble than for any leaning towards Miss Pentwistle's way of transacting it. So she replied, with a fine reserve of her forces for either emergency,

'Well, you know, it depends entirely upon circumstances. Of course I am delighted to be of any use. At the same time, I think it is always safer to feel one's way at first. It is so uncomfortable to find you have done the wrong thing.'

'Exactly. But you don't often do the wrong thing, at least the poor people don't think you do, in showing them that you feel a kindly interest in them.'

'Oh, dear, no, of course not,' replied Mrs. Antony at once, feeling that the ice would bear in that direction now. 'I always long so for poor people to understand me, and to feel that I really want to do them good. In fact, I am never comfortable unless I have some one of that sort to be kind to. I am hoping that Mr. Rock will give me something to do before long. It would be so charming to go and sit down and have a chat with an old woman in one of those ivy-covered cottages. You know in Hurchester the poor people lived in such filthy dens, positively repulsive.'

'I daresay,' said my lady, with a curious smile, as she leaned back amongst the puffed and rustling satin, 'and it is natural, under such circumstances, to think that they had better take care of themselves. But the cottages here are all that ivy and abundance of moss can make them. Of course one knows that the moss means

damp, but that goes for nothing. I hope Miss Dormer likes this part of the country.'

'Likes it? Oh, she is charmed with it! She says she has never seen anything so beautiful. Indeed, my la——'

Mrs. Antony caught herself up, as one who hears the ice cracking and feels the cold water through the soles of her boots. But it was only for a moment. Before Lady Lowater could note a pause in the syllables, she had made all right.

'Valence says it is exactly like one of Millais' landscapes; you know that sweet thing of his in the Academy last year?'

And then, seeing that Lady Lowater looked doubtful, she continued, with a pretty air of doubt, too.

'Was it last year? I should think very likely it was not. Perhaps ever so long ago. But, at any rate, it was something of his.'

'Indeed! I never understood that Millais went in for landscape. I always fancied figures and historical things were more in his line. But I don't know. I see the Academy so seldom that he might have dozens of landscapes there, all of them like Lowater, and I should know nothing about it. I will ask Lady Belleray some time.'

'Oh! no, no; do not trouble. Most likely it is only a mistake of mine. I do blunder over names most ridiculously. As likely as not, it is quite another artist.'

'At the same time,' said Miss Pentwistle, with just a touch of spitefulness, for there was no harm in catching Mr. Antony's wife tripping, 'it would be a satisfaction to know if Mr. Millais has ever done Lowater the honour of putting it upon canvas. We must try to find out. And here is Miss Dormer herself. She will tell us all about it.'

CHAPTER XVII.

Valence came forward; a bright, sensible, intelligent girl, concerning whom one thought less of how she looked than of a certain healthful freshness which surrounded her, and which produced, amongst the elegant marriage gifts and the varnish and or-molu of Mr. Antony's drawing-room, the feeling that a good, honest bush of sweetbriar might give rise to in the midst of half an acre of carpet-gardening. She had walked up from the Cove, gathering ferns by the cliff-side as she came, and the climb had given a glow to her cheeks and a brightness to her eyes which made her even pleasanter than usual to look upon.

She was certainly a contrast, and Lady Lowater felt it, both to the artificial elegance of her mother and the absence of that quality, artificial or otherwise, in Miss Pentwistle.

'We were just talking,' said her lady-ship, when the introductions and a few general remarks had been disposed of—'we were just talking about the beauty of the neighbourhood, and Mrs. Antony tells me it reminds you so much of some of Millais' paintings. I should so like to know which. I have never thought of him as a landscape-painter; but of course one would feel very proud if he really had taken our little village as a subject.'

Miss Dormer looked puzzled.

'Lowater like a landscape by Millais? I really don't remember.'

Mrs. Antony darted a look of something like annoyance at her daughter.

'Well, I was just telling Lady Lowater that perhaps it might not be Millais at all. I have such a wretched memory for names. I get quite confused about my own sometimes. At any rate, it was a landscape of somebody's that you said it reminded you of.'

'Did I? Well, I forget. But, at any rate, the country about here is very pretty, whether it is like a landscape by Millais or not.

'Pretty?' said Mrs. Antony. 'It is perfectly charming; and to anyone like myself, who has never lived in a real village before, it is so full of interest. Now I think those dear old labourers in their smock-frocks are delicious. Mr. Antony and I met one last night, somewhere near the park-gates. The very delightfullest old creature, with a grisly beard, and such a rough, honest face. He had a little black dog with him, as characteristic as himself. A perfect picture the two of them made.'

'Oh! I know,' said Lady Lowater. 'It was old Ben Dyson, the woodman. He is one of the best men about the place, as well as the most picturesque. Poor fellow! he has seen a good deal of trouble. Indeed, it is his daughter in whose behalf I should like to interest Miss Dormer.'

And here Lady Lowater turned towards Valence, and Mrs. Antony entered into conversation with Miss Pentwistle, who was admiring a quaint little silver inkstand on the table.

'Pretty, is it not?' said the solicitor's wife; 'and one of my very choicest treasures, because it has been in our family since Queen Anne's time. Indeed, I should not feel like myself if I had not that little inkstand about me. You

know, one does get so attached to trifles, when they have a family history.'

'Oh! dear, yes,' responded Miss Pentwistle, with a certain feeling of relief that she had not, after all, been quite 'out' as regarded the antiquity of Mrs. Antony's descent. A silver inkstand of Queen Anne's time was as satisfactory as an old family butler, viewed in its relation to respectability, and might be accepted as an atonement for the absence of real lace upon the person of its possessor. There was also a pride in knowing that the position which she might have occupied herself was now filled by a lady who, at any rate, had a pedigree to boast of. Mr. Antony had not socially descended in choosing a successor to his affections.

'I dote upon these little matters myself,' Miss Pentwistle continued. 'I saw at once that the inkstand was an old family piece. One does not see that kind of work now-a-days. So full of dear associations, is it not; and forms such a delightful link with the past? And you really do wish to make acquaintance with some of our poor people?'

Mrs. Antony felt that she might with safety be enthusiastic now.

'I should be charmed, Miss Pentwistle, perfectly charmed. In fact, I feel that I ought to go amongst the poor, and try to do them good. I tell Mr. Antony he must find out some nice people for me to be kind to, respectable, aged old couples, you know, who would be thankful for a pudding now and then, or a little soup, or anything to show that one had a friendly feeling. It is such a mistake to neglect one's inferiors. But I daresay you can tell me a great deal better than Mr. Antony can where there are some nice

poor people. I am sure you must spend your time in going about doing good.'

Miss Pentwistle allowed that there was some truth in the statement.

'Ah! yes,' continued Mrs. Antony. 'It is wonderful how one finds out. I knew from the very first that you must be one of those who devote their lives to charity. So delightful! I only wish I had the same talent. Of course it is a talent, you know; and we ought not to murmur if we don't all possess it. But I do feel so reproached sometimes, when I see the labours of women like yourself. However, you will take me, will you not? to some of your dear old people, and you will let me hear you talk to them, and then perhaps—'

'Oh! with the greatest pleasure,' said Miss Pentwistle, promptly, beginning to think there was really a great amount of good in Mrs. Antony. To have one's own strong points discovered is a fine help towards the appreciation of one who discovers them. 'Indeed, it will be a great help to me to have some one upon whom I can devolve a few of my cases. You see, in a secluded neighbourhood like this, at a distance from wealth and commerce, anyone who feels an interest in the poor need never be without occupation. Perhaps, if I were to take you first to see poor Margaret Dyson, the daughter of that old labourer whom you met. She is in a very suffering condition just now.'

Mrs. Antony put out her hand in a gentle, protesting manner.

'Not if she is very suffering, dear Miss Pentwistle—not if she is very suffering. I could not bear it. It does hurt me so to see people in pain, and know I cannot relieve them. Anything but that. And then, you see, I cannot help letting my feelings overcome me.'

'Ah! that does not do at all,' said Miss Pentwistle, with the air of an expert. 'There is no good to be effected unless you can keep your feelings completely under control.'

'Of course not, and that is why I feel I am so useless in a very suffering case. Do take me, please, to some aged people, as I said before, to whom I can supply a few little comforts, and it will be such a pleasure. Nothing really gives me such delight as to be kind to people of that sort. Hopeless distress unnerves me at once. Oh! Lady Lowater, must you really go?

And Mrs. Antony turned towards my lady, who had been holding a close and apparently interesting conversation with Valence Dormer about what could be done for the dying woman at the woodman's cottage.

'Must you really go, Lady Lowater? It was so kind of you to come and see me. I have been asking Miss Pentwistle about the poor people here, and she has promised to try to make me of some use amongst them. I tell her I never feel really happy in a place unless I am trying to make people comfortable.'

'It is a very admirable state of mind,' said her ladyship. 'I am sure you will never lack occupation, if you can manage to carry out your wishes. Miss Dormer has promised to see Margaret Dyson tomorrow, and try what can be done for her in the way of nursing. We hope to see you at the Court some day, Mrs. Antony.'

'So kind, so very kind. You are really too good. It will be such a pleasure. My hashand tells me the paintings are so beautiful.'

'I don't know. But there are lovely

walks in the plantations, and Miss Pentwistle shall show you them. And from one part of the grounds we can see the ocean—that is, when Lady Belleray's chestnut-trees are not in leaf.'

'Oh, how delightful! I think a sea-view is such an advantage. I had no idea you commanded it. A thousand thanks. It will be such a pleasure to me to come.'

And with many other like words, and with many a sweet smile, Mrs. Antony allowed the first of her bridal callers to depart.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'Well, that is done,' said Lady Lowater, speaking as if to herself, when the horses' heads were turned in the direction of home.

Miss Pentwistle gave the buffalo robe a tuck on her own side. The weather was cold for the end of April, and the bridal drawing-room, even with a good fire, had been chilly.

'Yes, it is as you say, done. But I think we have had a tolerably pleasant call. Upon the whole, we may look upon Mrs. Antony as an acquisition to general society.'

'We will wait and see,' said Lady Lowater, quietly. 'I am never able to feel sure about new people. I have a most curious feeling of having seen her before somewhere, or, at least, some one very much like her, and the feeling grows upon me. But of course I am mistaken, for did she not say she was quite a stranger in this neighbourhood?'

'Yes, at least Mrs. Petipase said so. And then you remember Mrs. Antony said she had never lived in a village before, so she must be a stranger here. She is very fascinating, is she not?'

'Oh, by all means. But it is the sort of fascination that never fascinates me. I am always on the defensive when I am expected to be charmed. However, we will give her the credit of having pretty manners.'

'Well, you know, Lady Lowater, I call

it a great deal more than pretty manners. It is a sort of style which always ensures a woman success in the world. Do you know, I found out only yesterday that Mrs. Antony has already been a widow twice.'

Lady Lowater positively laughed; a rare thing for her to do.

'My dear Miss Pentwistle, I did not know that was the sort of success a woman liked to ensure. Pray let her go on and prosper. But what will Mr. Antony say to it?

'Well, you know, I don't mean that it is pleasant for her to have her husbands die, one after the other, but she secures another establishment without much delay. I am perfectly sure if Mr. Antony died too she would marry a fourth time.'

'And so am I. I quite agree with you there. Mrs. Antony is a person who might be expected to have as many husbands as the woman of Samaria, the only difference being that she would marry them one at a time, and have the property settled upon herself. Which is of course a much more creditable way of arranging matters.'

Miss Pentwistle looked shocked.

'Lady Lowater! You do put the Scriptures to such curious uses. Do you think it is quite reverent?'

'I don't know. I always thought one of the best uses of the Bible was to apply it to the conduct of everyday life. At any rate that is what Mr. Rock says about it, and he has a great amount of commonsense out of the pulpit, whatever you may think he has in it.'

'In my opinion he has not very much in it, and that is an unfortunate thing for a clergyman.'

'Of course it is. I am inclined to think,

however, that Mr. Rock has it both ways. And, even if not, common-sense is as useful outside the church as inside. Mr. Rock's best sermon is his daily life. But we will let him alone. You and I cannot agree about our spiritual pastors and masters. Now you like Mr. Crudenay, with his mastery over the emotions, and his partiality for lemons at any price.'

'Oh, Lady Lowater, *please* don't. It is so painful to me. To speak so of an earnest man.'

'Well, then, I won't. But to say of one man that he has no common-sense is almost as bad as to say of another that he has a weakness for lemon-juice, both with veal and with his domestic relations. Let us talk about Miss Dormer. She is refreshing, is she not? I had a really interesting conversation with her while you and Mrs.

Antony were going into raptures over that old inkstand.'

Just a tinge of sharpness crept into Miss Pentwistle's manner.

'Yes. I thought the young lady seemed disposed entirely to appropriate you. Rather unbecoming in her position. When I was her age we were taught to keep ourselves in the background. But times are changed now.'

'And I am glad they are, for I should have been sorry to miss what Valence Dormer had to say. I do enjoy talking to a sensible girl, who has something to do in the world, and who knows how to do it.'

'It is well she has a vocation,' said Miss Pentwistle, with more meanings than one in her voice. 'It makes her independent of marrying, and that is such a good thing for a young woman now-a-days. I suppose she will soon be returning to Hurchester. I believe nurses on the regular staff in a great public institution are not allowed very long holidays.'

'Is she on the regular staff just now?'

'I am not sure. But, at any rate, a feeling of what is becoming under the circumstances will probably induce her to leave Mr. and Mrs. Antony alone together as soon as the reception of wedding callers has ceased.'

'You talk like a book, Miss Pentwistle. Now, does that mean that you are not satisfied with Miss Dormer?'

'Not in the least, Lady Lowater. I only mean that it is so much better for husband and wife to be left to themselves at first, in order that they may become acquainted with each other's character and peculiarities. There must always be a certain amount of friction in the commencement of a new life, and it is so much better for it to be got over quietly.'

'Of course. Friction of all sorts is best kept in the background. But I have no doubt Mrs. Antony will give Miss Dormer to understand, in some way or other, when she wishes to be left alone. We will arrange an evening before long for asking them to dine quietly.'

'Lady Lowater! How kind of you! But why should you give yourself the trouble? Mr. Antony could hardly have expected that you should have done his wife the honour of calling upon her, but to ask her to dine is a great condescension on your part. However, there is no hurry.'

For Miss Pentwistle had her own reasons for wishing that the condescension should be deferred until Miss Dormer had returned to her duties at the Hurchester hospital, especially as Sir Merrion might be expected home now, almost at any time. But Lady Lowater's reply was not assuring.

'When a thing has to be done, I like it to be done quickly. As soon as Mrs. Antony has returned my call, I shall make arrangements. Besides, I wish Miss Dormer to come with her mother.'

That was enough. Miss Pentwistle knew when to speak and when to be silent. One must go so far with Lady Lowater and no further. Arrived at the park gates, my lady checked the coachman.

'I shall get out here, Miss Pentwistle. I want a brisk walk. Calling always makes me so stiff. And you need not trouble to come with me, for I know you like to have a quiet time before dinner. Humphreys, drive Miss Pentwistle on to the house.'

'Thank you, Lady Lowater. I do like to have a little quiet time for reflection. Then we meet again by-and-by.'

And, with a wave of the hand, her ladyship went in the direction of the plantations.

Passing the lines of carefully fenced and guarded coops, where farm-yard hens were brooding the pheasants' eggs, that being the surest means of securing a good supply of birds for the next season, she met Mr. Antony. The game was a part of the property over which he exercised a rigorous supervision, because the profit of it went, for the most part, into his own pocket.

Lady Lowater stopped when she was a few paces from him.

'I have done as you wished me, Mr. Antony. I have just returned from a call upon your wife.'

'That is quite right,' said Mr. Antony, and said no more, only walked about from coop to coop, to see that the fowls were

kept in proper order. Lady Lowater's courtesy was evidently no more than he had expected.

'I did even more than make the call,' she continued. 'I went to the Bellerays, and Dollingbrokes, and Crumberleys, and Murray-Mortimers first, and told them I was going to make it. And I had out the big carriage, and the coachman, and the footman, and all the rest of the things. I hope you are satisfied that I have done my best.'

She looked very disdainful as she said it, and did not try to hide her disdain.

'All right,' Mr. Antony replied, throwing a handful of grain to one of the hens. 'People go very much by what their betters do. I have no doubt Bettina will have plenty of callers of the right sort now. I am much obliged to you. It was an attention on your part which did

not cost much trouble; and, as I have said before, one good turn deserves another.'

'May I ask which is the good turn that is so deserving?' said my lady, scornfully.

'My silence, Lady Lowater.'

And another handful of corn went to the fowls.

Lady Lowater just set her lips a little more firmly together, but she made no reply.

'You say you told the other people you were going to call?' Mr. Antony continued, after a pause. 'That was a very good stroke. I wish to occupy a different position in the neighbourhood now. Indeed, that was my chief object in bringing Mrs. Antony to the Elms. A man at my time of life is not so much led by other considerations.'

'Poor thing!' said my lady. 'I hope you have told her so.'

'You need not be sarcastic, Lady Lowater. I have as much right to my pride as you have to yours. By her marriage with me, Mrs. Antony gains comfort, luxury, freedom from pecuniary care, together with many other advantages; and in return she makes for me an elegant home, to which I am now able to invite the visits of gentlewomen. Though Mrs. Antony has no property, she is quite a lady. I have satisfied myself of that, and therefore she is entitled to the position which I hope she will now enjoy. I suppose we must begin to think about letting the shooting for next season. It ought to bring in a good two hundred this year, as game is likely to be so scarce. I will make a note of it to-morrow at the office.'

'I don't think you need do anything of the sort,' said my lady. 'I expect Merrion home in a week or two, and he will want the shooting himself.'

Mr. Antony shrugged his shoulders.

'Merrion coming home! I thought that piece of foolishness had blown over. And, pray, what brings him?'

'His own inclination, I presume,' said her ladyship, loftily. 'It is within the limits of reasonableness that a son should wish to see his mother, occasionally.'

'Perhaps. And also that he should wish to see the estate of which he supposes himself to be the master. Well, we will let that go. But, Lady Lowater, I must tell you this. If that son of yours puts on any more of his airs with me, neither his pride nor yours shall keep me from telling him who and what he is.'

And Mr. Antony turned from the coops to watch the effect of his words.

Lady Lowater looked away to the bud-

ding green of the larch trees. There was but one spot of brightness now in all her life—the love she bore to this son, who, knowing nothing as yet, gave her a mother's due of chivalry and affection. As yet she was to him his queen, but a word from this man could sweep her queendom away. Still Mr. Antony should not see that she was afraid.

'I don't think it would serve your purpose,' she said, carelessly, 'to have a quarrel with Merrion.'

'Would it serve yours, madam?'

Lady Lowater ground the gravel under her feet, but said, as quietly as before,

'Suppose you do your worst. Tell him all you please. Put the place into Chancery, and what better will you be? You make a fair income out of it now—you will make nothing then.'

'Nothing except my revenge,' Mr. An-

tony replied, 'and they say that is sweet. I don't deny that, as things are now, I get my pickings, but a man will do for hate sometimes what he will not do for gain. Merrion has driven me to the very edge of my patience more than once with his lofty airs. He had better not do it too often. And you had better not either.'

'One can but die once,' Lady Lowater said, half to herself, 'but it takes all one's life to do it;' and, turning away, she made for the path which led to the house. He watched her with a coldly speculative look on his face.

'There is one person, at any rate, who would not go into mourning if she heard of my death. As she says, I do get my pickings, and, if the place went where it belongs, I should lose them. One may as well keep still. But they shall both of them be afraid of me all the same.'

CHAPTER XIX.

LADY LOWATER'S call was returned in due course, and then arrangements were made for the quiet little dinner.

'It shall be as quiet as possible, Miss Pentwistle. I shall not even go to the extent of providing a gentleman each.'

'Why should you, Lady Lowater? We can get on very well without. The only difficulty is that there will be an odd number, and Mr. Antony will be left alone with his wine.'

'I have thought of that, and so I shall ask Mr. Rock. You really must beam upon him a little, Miss Pentwistle, and make him comfortable, poor man.'

'I will do anything that is necessary,' said that lady, fetching a sheet of paper upon which to note down the order of the guests at the dinner-table, together with a suitable bill of fare; 'but I am in hopes that Miss Dormer will take that duty off my hands. Why should she not?'

And Miss Pentwistle looked keenly at Lady Lowater.

Yes, just a little shadow passed over the faded face—enough to show that my lady did not care for things to go in that direction. Now, it was the very direction that Miss Pentwistle did want them to go in. And, if Lady Lowater had not mentioned Mr. Rock as the remedy for the odd number, she intended to have mentioned him herself. Not so much that she thought anything would really come of it as that she should perhaps, by suggesting it, get a better sight of whatever plans might be

in course of construction for Sir Merrion's benefit. A most curious whim for Lady Lowater to take up; but then she never did things like other people. Now, after Miss Pentwistle's adroit remark, she could see there was something of the sort in her ladyship's mind.

'Dear me! of course. I had forgotten we were providing some one else to beam upon him. Then, Miss Pentwistle, you will have to beam upon Mr. Antony, because you see I must devote myself to the bride. I shall have the table made as small as possible, so that we can talk across it, because you see, under the circumstances, there is nothing for it but for Mr. Antony to take me in, and I cannot, no, I really cannot, endure an hour and a half of him. Therefore I shall put you within conversation distance of him, and, whilst you relieve me, I shall do my best to convince Mrs. Antony that she is the object of my attentions. Now, you quite understand.'

'Quite. And then Mr. Rock and Miss Dormer will look after themselves.'

Again that slight shadow flitting across Lady Lowater's face, noted as clearly as before by the watchful Miss Pentwistle, into whose eyes there came a shrewd light as her ladyship replied, after a little silence,

'I wonder now, if it would be better to make just a trifle more of a regular dinner party of it. I could ask the Belleray girls and I know they would come. Not of course that it would be anything short of a nuisance to them to meet the Antonys, but they never refuse an invitation here, because if they don't come when I am alone they cannot expect to be asked when Merrion is at home. The drum again, Miss Pentwistle, you see.'

'Exactly. But I would not ask them for next week. You are already embarrassed with riches in the shape of womankind, and to ask the two Belleray young ladies would so increase the weight that you would be obliged to have a detachment of men from Byborough. You see one can put up with four and two upon a pinch, especially where it is an affair of condescension after all, but six and two would be really an infliction. If I were you, I would let matters stand as they are. I have no doubt amongst us we can make the evening pass off tolerably. At any rate we will try.'

'Very well,' said Lady Lowater. But she said it doubtfully. 'Mr. and Mrs. Antony and Miss Dormer and Mr. Rock. The small square dining-table. I at one end, with Mr. Antony at my elbow, Mr. Rock at the other end with Mrs. Antony on his right. On his left you will sit, and Miss Dormer on the other side of you.'

'Then you will have Mr. and Mrs. Antony together on the other side, which will never do.'

'Dear me! of course not. I should say put Miss Dormer to the left of Mr. Rock, and Mrs Antony on his right.'

Again that shrewd light in Miss Pentwistle's eyes, again the flitting cloud over Lady Lowater's face.

'No, I will not do it that way. I want Miss Dormer beside me. The problem is really becoming as difficult as that about the man with a fox and three geese, which had to be brought over the river two at a time, so that the fox was never left alone with the geese or something of that sort. Now, I begin again. Mr. Rock at one end, I at the other, Mr. Antony on my right, Miss Dormer on my left, Mrs. An-

tony on Mr. Rock's right, you on his left. That is as I wish it to be. Make a plan of it, Miss Pentwistle, on your piece of paper, that we may not get into trouble again, for my brain feels as weary already as if I had demonstrated a proposition in geometry. Have you put it down safely?'

'I have,' said Miss Pentwistle.

'And you ought to be satisfied, because you have a gentleman on each side of you, which is more than anyone else has. And you will have to beam upon Mr. Rock, after all, because Mrs. Antony will not like you to beam upon her husband. Nevertheless, you understand that without beaming upon him to any unjustifiable extent, you are yet to engage him in such an interesting conversation that I may be free of the responsibility of him by at least the space of two separate half-hours,

during which intervals I shall devote myself to the guest of the evening.'

And Lady Lowater's lip curled.

'I will see that it is all made right for you,' said Miss Pentwistle. 'I am sure it is very kind of you to ask them, and, if they look at it in the right light, they will see that it shows far more attention to have them in this quiet way than if you had invited half-a-dozen people to meet them. Because in that case it would only have looked like clearing off a few of your outstanding debts.'

'Oh, yes, I had not thought of that. Well, then, after dinner, if the evening is fine, I shall propose a walk through the plantations, and you distinctly understand, Miss Pentwistle, that you are not to say anything to the contrary when I propose it. That horrible little bit of purgatory before the gentlemen come in, is simply

more than I can undertake. And I am not at all sure that matters will be better when they do make their appearance. Outside one does at least get fresh air, and the different prospects give one something to talk about, and if one is silent it does not count for so much. Now, my dear Miss Pentwistle, do you understand your rôle?"

'I think I do, Lady Lowater.'

And as Miss Pentwistle finished her plan of the dinner-table, with the names of the guests in their several places, she thought she understood Lady Lowater's too. But of course she said nothing about that.

CHAPTER XX.

The evening was more perfect than could have been expected, even for the middle of May. Lady Lowater had purposely fixed an earlier hour than usual for dinner, in order that the relief of a gardenstroll after it might be more admissible. But had Miss Pentwistle so far forgotten her instructions as to venture a protest against leaving the drawing-room, the golden sunshine glancing through the blossoming lilaes and laburnums, and the gleams of light and shadow fleeking the distant plantation, where the thrushes and blackbirds were telling their tuneful story,

would have conquered, especially as it was necessary for Mrs. Antony to keep up her character as a lover of simple, outdoor country life.

'You know, after being shut up in a big town like Hurchester, I feel like a child let loose from school,' she said. 'I tell Mr. Antony he does not know what a treat he is giving me every time he takes me down what he calls the most uninteresting lanes. Only let me have your green leaves around me and blue sky overhead, and you may do anything you like with me. I am perfectly content.'

This was said to Miss Pentwistle, as the two ladies sauntered across the terrace to the plantation-path, Lady Lowater and Miss Dormer having turned aside into another part of the grounds. Mrs. Antony had a way of speaking of herself in the passive mood, as though she were something to be petted, and managed, and played upon, and paid attention to, but Miss Pentwistle had not had enough of it yet to become tired of it. And then she was certainly a fascinating woman, with the social tact which finds out other people's likes and dislikes, and ministers to or avoids them as occasion may require. Men or women whom she cared to please nearly always found themselves pleased by her, whether they made up their minds to it or not.

'I think we will go to the rock-seat,' said Miss Pentwistle. 'Lady Lowater likes me to take strangers there, because you get such a lovely view of the sea. It is such a pretty winding path, too, which leads to it. Or would you prefer keeping to the open lawn? It is very pretty there, now that the trees are in blossom.'

'Oh! no, thank you. Please take me to the sea-view. I do love the sea. And I think a gentle little climb does me good, when it is not too steep, you know. I hope it is not very steep. And nothing to make you dizzy with looking down. I am such a foolish creature about looking down from a height.'

'There is nothing to be afraid of, I assure you,' said Miss Pentwistle. 'It is really nothing of a climb at all. We only get the prospect because there happens to be a little break through Lady Belleray's chestnuts, when they are not in full leaf. I come nearly every day myself, because I think a little gentle ascent is better than being always on the level. It will be——'

Miss Pentwistle was going to say that the most direct road to the rock-seat lay through a little narrow path to the left, but, before she could express herself to that effect, Mrs. Antony had taken the turning, slightly to her companion's surprise; for visitors did not usually find their way into it.

'I was going to tell you the path; but how curious that you should find it out by yourself! I suppose it is an instinct which some people have. Now, I always want telling exactly where to go.'

Mrs. Antony stooped to gather some wood-anemones which were growing by a mossy stump.

Is this the path? I was only just turning aside to look at these dear little wild flowers. They are so perfectly sweet. Flowers of any kind are a treat to me, but wild flowers most of all. Have you not a weakness for wild flowers yourself?'

'Well, I don't know. You see, I am so much in the habit of seeing them that

I really forget to ask myself whether I have a weakness for them or not. I suppose, as you have not lived in the country much, they have quite a different effect upon you. I think you said you did not know much about the country?'

For Miss Pentwistle had a certain amount of curiosity, perhaps justifiable under the circumstances, as to the antecedents of this pleasant and pretty stranger, whom her own old lover had placed at the head of his establishment. Mrs. Antony was not communicative, but what she did say was definite enough.

'I don't know anything at all about it, my dear Miss Pentwistle. I believe my people had a place originally, near some village or other; but that was when I was almost a baby, and I have been living abroad, or in big towns, ever since, so that the country has all the charm of novelty to me now. I rejoice in it. What a happy life you must live here!'

And Mrs. Antony laid her hand upon Miss Pentwistle's arm with a dainty little invitation of confidence.

'I have no wish to change it, Mrs. Antony. It suits me very well. I daresay some people might consider it dull, as Lady Lowater goes out so seldom; but, you see, having been here so long, I have become accustomed to it, and she is really very kind.'

'Yes, I should think so. It is too bad for people to talk about her so ill-naturedly as they do. You know, the Bellerays were calling upon me the other day, and they did talk so disagreeably about Lady Lowater being bitter and ill-tempered, and they pitied you so, and wondered how you could put up with her. I do think it is so mean of people to talk

in that way. And the Crumberleys were almost as bad.'

This was a convenient way of intimating that the Bellerays and Crumberleys had called at the Elms, and Miss Pentwistle understood it accordingly. She was very sharp in finding out any little social shifts of this nature, perhaps because she would not have been above making use of them herself, if necessary. But she would not minister to Mrs. Antony's vanity by taking any notice. Not that she disliked Mrs. Antony, either on her own account or because she was Mr. Antony's wife, but still there was a something which made her want to put the solicitor's bride just a step lower on the ladder. She seemed a little too much at ease amongst her aristocratic surroundings, just a little too unconscious of the fact that her reception at Lowater Court was a condescension, after all. Miss Pentwistle would have enjoyed telling her a little of the conversation which had accompanied the arrangement of that dinner-party. And then for her to take upon herself to discuss Lady Lowater's temper.

'Lady Lowater and I quite understand each other,' she replied, with a touch of stiffness, 'so that my home here is a very comfortable one. I forget whether you attend our church or not. Have you met Mr. Rock before?'

This was intended as a delicate snub, but it had no more effect than a shot on a down pillow.

'Oh! yes, poor little man! A most wretched living, is it not? No wonder he does not marry. You know, I always feel so sorry for elergymen on anything less than three hundred a year. How can they be comfortable? The Bellerays say they

think Lady Lowater ought to supplement his income. She must be well able to afford it. Or rather Sir Merrion. Is he really coming home soon? How very delightful for his mother! But, if he should retire and marry, it would be awkward, would it not? I suppose Lady Lowater would have to leave the Court then.'

'What an impertinent woman you are!' thought Miss Pentwistle, who was now quite ready to give Mrs. Antony credit for any amount of matrimonial scheming. And, from what had already been said, Mr. Rock's position was entirely understood. Miss Dormer's mamma would not take any steps in that direction. But she only replied, 'Lady Lowater and myself never discuss these matters. I find it better to avoid personal subjects. I hope the ascent is not too trying for you; we are very near the top now.'

'Not at all, thank you. You have taken me up so gently that I have not felt it in the least. And then the path is so lovely that one forgets all about being tired. Ah! now I begin to get a glimpse of the beautiful blue sea. Oh! Miss Pentwistle, how delightful! No wonder you come here so often. Dear me, how those chestnut-trees have grown! I am sure they used——'

And then Mrs. Antony paused, but not before Miss Pentwistle had heard the words.

'I am sure,' she continued, 'they used to tell me—or, perhaps, it was Mr. Antony himself. You see I get things mixed up a little. Everything is so new and strange.'

'Yes, of course. Or, perhaps, you have been here before, a long time ago, long enough to have almost forgotten it, and now things are coming back to you a little. Do you know, when you turned so naturally into that path I felt sure that you must have known the place.'

Mrs. Antony glanced into Miss Pentwistle's hard, matter-of-fact face, but only read there a justifiable expression of curiosity, nothing malicious. Still it would be better to make an explanation. She bent her head and laid her hand upon her lips with an appearance of absorption in some far-off memory. And then she said, hesitatingly,

'I am trying to remember.'

'You see,' said Miss Pentwistle, briskly, 'you might have been staying with some friends somewhere about, and they might have brought you for a walk through the grounds. Lady Lowater is very kind in letting people come.'

But it would not do for Mrs. Antony to accept that solution of the problem, since

she had already assured Lady Lowater more than once that she had never been in the neighbourhood before. She drew a step or two nearer to Miss Pentwistle, and said, in a slightly mysterious voice,

'I have certainly seen this before. You know one does sometimes fancy one has seen things before, even though it may only have been in dreams. Don't you sometimes, when you are shown anything very beautiful, have a curious sensation of familiarity, as if you had seen it in a dream?

'Oh, dear, no!' said Miss Pentwistle. 'I never dream at all, except about things that have been happening during the day. And, when I awake, I know that it is a dream. I never get it mixed up with anything else.'

This was not satisfactory. Miss Pentwistle must be made to understand what a gulf existed between common-place people like herself, and those of exceptionally receptive temperament.

'Ah! then, of course, you cannot understand. People generally laugh at me when I talk about these fancies of mine, but I assure you they are quite real to me, far too real. It is a misfortune sometimes to have too vivid an imagination. One cannot distinguish between the ideal and the actual. People who live on the safe level of every-day life ought to be very thankful.'

Now, that might be true, but, at the same time, it was not flattering. Miss Pentwistle could see that Mrs. Antony was proud of her own imaginative faculty, and, by taking for granted that certain other people were destitute of it, was placing those people in an inferior position to herself. Miss Pentwistle had no imagi-

nation, and knew that she had none, but still she liked to be credited with as much as might give her a comfortable foothold amongst the sensitively organised sisterhood, and so she replied, with just a little touch of spitefulness against this elegant stranger who was coming out in quite a new character,

'I am not what is called a person of imagination, Mrs. Antony, I know that quite well. I often wish that Providence had gifted me with a larger measure, because I have no doubt it adds colouring to life. I have never myself had any difficulty in remembering where I have been, and where I have not been, but I can quite sympathise with people of a different nature. At the same time, you know my tendency of mind is to search for rational causes. I like to find out the reasons of things. Now I should say Mr. Antony or

somebody else had brought you here for a walk some time. That would explain everything.'

'Except my having assured Lady Lowater that I had never been in the place before,' thought Mrs. Antony to herself. And then a bright idea suggested itself. Coming still nearer to her companion, she said, in a low voice,

'Miss Pentwistle, you have made me half afraid of you. You have such a clear, penetrating mind.'

That was better. Miss Pentwistle was brought round directly. To have such a mind was the very thing upon which she prided herself.

'I believe the reasoning faculty is more developed in me than the imaginative one, Mrs. Antony, but I should be very sorry for you to feel afraid of me on that account. I very much dislike to assume an

attitude of superiority, however thankful I may be for the powers vouchsafed to me. I hope you will try to feel yourself quite at home with me.'

'Oh! thank you—that is so good of you. And will you promise not to be angry or laugh at me if I tell you something very curious about myself? I could not tell it to everyone, but I think I might trust you.

'By all means, Mrs. Antony. I assure you I shall sympathise if it is anything that distresses you.'

'No, it does not distress me. It is not anything of that sort, only—'

And Mrs. Antony paused, and passed her hand over her forehead, and sighed, like a person who is compelled to live at perpetual high pressure.

'Only it seems to set me apart from other people so. They never understand me if I make the least reference to it. Clairvoyance, Miss Pentwistle.'

And Mrs. Antony drew back a little, to watch the effect of her words. That would explain everything, surely.

'You are not shocked, are you, dear Miss Pentwistle?'

'Oh, no. Mesmerism and that sort of thing, I suppose. It is very curious. You go out of yourself and see things when you are in a certain state of mind, do you not?'

'Exactly. You have expressed it in the most perfect manner. And the strangest thing is that, when you come to yourself, you do not know anything about it. It is only when, perhaps years afterwards, you actually come to the place which has been presented to you, you have such a curious feeling of familiarity. You know you have seen it before, and you cannot tell

where. Are you ever acted upon in that manner yourself?'

'Not at all, Mrs. Antony, I assure you; but it is very interesting to me to hear about it. Can you remember any other instance?'

'Well, not just now. Of course, you know, they must have happened very often; but, unless I make a note of them at the time, they slip out of my mind. But you see now how it is, don't you, that that bit of blue sea was so familiar to me?'

'Yes, and it is very curious. You must tell me some time more about it. Now I think we ought to look for Lady Lowater.'

CHAPTER XXI.

They found her, coming with Valence Dormer down the path which led from Ben Dyson's cottage to the plantations.

'We have had a very pleasant little stroll,' said Miss Pentwistle, with the air of a person who has something more important to tell. 'I took Mrs. Antony up to the rock-seat, to show her the view, but she has seen it before.'

Mrs. Antony looked slightly uncomfortable. Miss Dormer looked very much surprised. Lady Lowater only said, carelessly,

'Indeed, I thought you were quite a stranger in these parts.'

And then she added, with a scarcely perceptible touch of disdainful annoyance,

'Or perhaps Mr. Antony has taken you through the grounds, some time.'

For this of course would be one of the consequences of his marriage, that feeling he could do as he liked on the estate, and having but little backwardness in letting other people see his power, the plantation walks and the rock-seat, and the secluded paths in which Lady Lowater had hitherto been accustomed to think her own thoughts undisturbed, would now be placed at the disposal of the new wife, in case the public lanes and commons did not afford sufficient scope for her enthusiastic love of Nature. But Miss Pentwistle explained.

'Oh, no! Mrs. Antony has never been in the grounds before. I thought at first Mr. Antony had most likely taken her, but she has seen the place in quite a different way. Do you know, Lady Lowater, Mrs. Antony is a clairvoyante?'

'Miss Pentwistle! such nonsense!' said Lady Lowater, but with an air of relief. Clairvoyance was better than unwarrantable intrusion upon the privacy of the grounds.

'Well, you may say it is nonsense, dear Lady Lowater, but all the same it is a fact. As soon as ever we reached the rock-seat, and Mrs. Antony saw those chestnuts on the Belleray side of the wall, she remarked how much they had grown. Did you not, now, Mrs. Antony? And how could you have noticed any difference in them, unless——'

'Oh! please, Miss Pentwistle,' and the solicitor's wife looked appealingly round, for it was inconvenient to have these newly created psychical peculiarities brought so prominently to the front, especially in the presence of Valence, who of course ought to have known all about them if they had really existed; but who, instead

of knowing anything about them, was standing there with an unmistakable expression of wonder in her truthful eyes.

'Oh, please, Miss Pentwistle, it is so uncomfortable for me to have anything said about it in public. I had so much rather let the whole thing drop. You know I am really afraid of my own feelings, sometimes. It is so stupid to find out one is different from other people. Indeed, I so dislike bringing the subject forward, that I have never even mentioned it to my own daughter. Have I, Valence dear?'

'No, mamma,' said Valence. 'This is the first time I have ever heard of it. Do you often see things in this way?'

'My child, let it drop. I should so like to forget all about it. Some time, Miss Pentwistle, perhaps we will have a little quiet talk about it, when I have got back again into my usual state of mind. But, after an instance of this kind, I feel so un-

nerved. It is really all that I can do to keep from breaking down entirely.'

'Suppose we go back to the house,' said Lady Lowater, who had a wholesome dread of hysterics. 'You look as if the excitement had been too much for you. Here is a smelling-bottle.'

Mrs. Antony took it with the helpless air of a person who has been 'put upon.' And then a few subdued sobs and chokes called for such demonstrations of sympathy as precluded a return to the dangerous topic. A few more steps brought them to the lawn, where the gentlemen were pacing up and down.

'Oh! there is Mr. Antony. Take me to him, please. I shall be all right in a few minutes. I am so sorry to have broken down in this ridiculous way, but you can't think what an effect anything of this kind has upon me. Thank you, dear Lady Lowater, for the smelling-bottle. Valence, perhaps you will let me take your arm. I am trembling all over. So foolish of me!'

Valence gave the help required, a curious look of mingled surprise and incredulity, not unnoticed by Lady Lowater, upon her face. And, within a quarter of an hour, the guests had departed, Mrs. Antony having found it impossible to regain her composure sufficiently to join in general conversation.

Miss Pentwistle, however, had the matter out with Lady Lowater as they sat in the drawing-room, waiting for the servants to come in for prayers.

'You know, my dear Lady Lowater, I have a particular interest in clairvoyance myself, because I firmly believe it proceeds from satanic agency.'

'In that case, then, Miss Pentwistle, you ought to let it alone.'

'And so I do, as a general rule. That is to say, I should not think it proper to attend a lecture upon the subject; but, when it is brought under one's personal notice, it makes a difference. Mrs. Antony is a remarkable instance of the manifestation '

'Nonsense, my dear Miss Pentwistle, Mrs. Antony is not a woman, I should think, who has any more communication with the spiritual world than she can help. She is no more a clairvoyante than you or I. I look upon her as a clever, wide-awake person, much more keenly alive to the promise of the life that now is than of that which is to come.'

'Very likely. But how could she know the chestnuts had grown, if she had never seen them before?'

'She had heard them described, probably. Merrion may have told Miss Dormer something about the place, and Miss Dormer has told her mother; and it has got fixed upon her mind in that way.'

'Ah! but there was something else. I told her we would go to the rock-seat, and she assented, saying that everything was equally new to her. And, when we got to that little side-path which leads to it, she turned into it as naturally as could be. Now, why should that be?'

'Most likely because you turned first.'

'No. On the contrary, I was a few steps behind, for I had stopped to listen to what I thought might be the note of a nightingale in the larch spinny. Mrs. Antony had not me to thank for leading in the right direction.'

'Then she turned into the path because it was a pretty one. You know, she is a lover of Nature.'

'Lady Lowater, you are very severe and very sceptical. I say she turned into it because she had seen it before, either in the clairvoyant or in some other state.'

'I should say it was some other state. But the matter is really of very little consequence. Now, I don't pretend to clairvoyance myself, but I have a most distinct impression that I have seen Mrs. Antony's face before. Most likely I have and then have forgotten all about it. In the same way she has been about in these parts at some time or other, and has been taken through the grounds when we were away, and so she remembers the impression she received, without being able to attach it to any particular set of circumstances. One need not go further than that for an explanation.'

'You think you have seen her before. Well, then, I will tell her so, and perhaps it will set her mind at rest. I never like people to think they are under the influence of anything which is not what it ought to be.'

'Not even when it is supposed to in-

vest them with a halo of interest in the eyes of the less gifted general public.'

'I see you think she is imposing.'

'That is just what 'I do think. It is what we all of us try to do in one way or another, and I do not know why we should blame Mrs. Antony very much for doing it in her own particular fashion. Of course, she naturally wishes us to feel an interest in her, and, not having any special qualifications of her own to produce it, she trades upon a happy accident of this kind. Most likely it was all got ready beforehand, as soon as she knew there was a prospect of any kind to be looked at, and we will give her the credit of having carried it out very cleverly, even to the sobs and the shakes and the desperate attempts at regaining composure. But, Miss Pentwistle, do get the servants in to prayers. I don't know how you feel, but the days are always too long for me.'

CHAPTER XXII.

Mrs. Antony was not to rest in peace. Next morning Miss Pentwistle took a walk down to the Cove, and brought back, as she always did from that little hotbed of gossip, one or two choice morsels as an antepasto to the otherwise flavourless midday meal.

As soon as Simmons had taken his departure, she began.

'It is such a comfort one isn't obliged to have the servants at luncheon-time.'

'I have never heard you make that remark before, Miss Pentwistle. I thought you liked to have them about you always and in full force too, just the same as you like grapes in May, and strawberries six months before their time, as a sort of help towards a feeling of superiority over your fellow-creatures. Now, neither fruit out of season, nor a couple of footmen in season, make me feel a bit better than other peo-Indeed it rather works the other way, for I think people ought to be ashamed of wanting so much making ready and doing for them. Now Mr. Rock, who rears his own potatoes, and gets through life honourably, with nobody but a poor woman to do for him, seems to me a much more wealthy person in the true sense of the word.'

'Never mind Mr. Rock, Lady Lowater. I have somebody much more interesting to talk about. I have been to call upon Mrs. Petipase.'

'Ah! then it is Mrs. Antony. But, Miss

Pentwistle, you are not to bring up clair-voyance. I have no wish for interesting psychical phenomena this morning, genuine or otherwise—chiefly otherwise, I should think.'

'And so should I, now, Lady Lowater. I am quite disposed to consider that whole affair of the rock-seat as just a clever piece of pretence. A person who would deceive you in one way would do it in another.'

'So you have found out, have you, that Mrs. Antony's internal motives are not clear as crystal? Oh, penetrating Miss Pentwistle! But tell us all about it. What has she been doing? I feel much more interest in her doings than her seeings.'

'Well, then, you remember that Queen Anne inkstand, that sweet little thing which I admired so much when we were calling there—and Mrs. Antony said it was an old family piece? Now, what do you think?'

'I think it was an old family piece, only most likely not Mrs. Antony's family. In fact, you have found out that she bought it at a sale.'

'Not quite. But somebody else did. Mrs. Petipase told me that her sister, Mrs. Cottman, who lives at a village near Hurchester, and was rather intimate with Mrs. Dormer, bought the inkstand at an old curiosity-shop near the cathedral, and had it polished it up and gave it to her as a wedding present. Now, what do you think of that, Lady Lowater?'

'I think it proves Mrs. Antony to be a very prudent, managing woman.'

'But as to the untruthfulness, Lady Lowater—the untruthfulness.'

'Oh! I daresay, if you attacked Mrs. Antony on the ground of the untruthful-

ness of it, she would tell you she had kept to facts. The inkstand no doubt was a family piece—of somebody else's. And as for feeling such an affection for it that she could not be comfortable out of its sight—well, people whose acquaintance with old silver is of a recent date are apt to want it always about them, less as a matter of love than display. I am afraid you would not be able to convince her that she has done anything naughty.'

'Nevertheless, it is the essence of a lie, Lady Lowater. I am sure you must admit that, and very dishonourable. And to think that you have invited her to dinner and treated her with such courtesy.'

'As to the dining, Miss Pentwistle, I am afraid, if we had no guests but those who adhered strictly to the truth, we should have to take all the leaves out of the table. Indeed, could we sit comfort-

ably at it ourselves? I would not be too sure.'

'I should not be in the least afraid, my dear Lady Lowater. It has been my aim, ever since conscience developed in me, to speak the truth, and hurt no man by word or deed. I am sure you could say the same, only you always try to make yourself out so much worse than you really are. Shall you keep on being attentive to Mrs. Antony?'

'Yes, just the same. As I said before, if one is only to be courteous to the strictly truthful people, we shall soon have very little occasion for our good manners at all. Then there is Miss Dormer. It would be unjust to visit upon her the sins of her mother.'

'Ah! Miss Dormer. I had almost forgotten. You had a long talk with her last night. Are you as favourably im-

pressed with her now as you were at first?'

Miss Pentwistle waited rather anxiously for the reply to this question. Mrs. Antony's shortcomings had not been entirely unwelcome, because they pointed to a cessation of intercourse between her ladyship and the solicitor's wife. There were occasions when even a good Churchwoman might rejoice in iniquity, and one of them was when it put a stop to an inconvenient acquaintance. But Lady Lowater's reply was by no means satisfactory.

'I like Valence Dormer very much. She has her mother's practical cleverness, together with an honesty of mind which has certainly not come to her from the maternal side. I intend to know more of her.'

'It would be rather difficult to do that, I am afraid, without at the same time encouraging Mrs. Antony. And I am afraid you would find her an inconvenience. She is exceedingly free in her expressions of opinion about other people.'

'So are we ourselves, Miss Pentwistle, otherwise I don't see how we could have kept up this conversation so long. Mrs. Antony and her daughter having so little in common, is perhaps an additional reason for kindness to the girl. But I have no doubt she will give much more than she receives, and so we need not talk about kindness.'

'Give! What can she give to you, Lady Lowater?'

'Just what I want, help for Margaret Dyson. I took her to the cottage last evening, whilst you were having your clairvoyance experiences with Mrs. Antony, and I have no doubt she has already done the poor girl more good than half-a-dozen doctor's visits. She seemed at once to see what was needed in the room. She

scarcely took a step without making something brighter and pleasanter. It might be only to shake up a pillow, or to move the chair into a better position, or quietly to brush away some dust, or draw a curtain so that the light might come in more cheerfully. Anyhow, when we came away, Margaret's face was ever so much brighter. And yet there was no fuss, no professional self-consequence about her. You could not tell how or when the things were done, only there was the difference.'

'They must miss her very much at the Hurchester hospital,' said Miss Pentwistle, tentatively. 'I wonder how long the lady superintendent will allow her to stay here?'

'As for that, I wish she could settle permanently in the village. I am sure we could find work enough for her.'

'Very likely. Only it would be such a pity for talents like hers to be wasted in a

place like this. I always think, when people have a gift, they ought to consider it a duty to go where it can have the fullest possible development. Now, you see, at Hurchester, and in a crowded hospital ward——'

'Oh, yes, I see all that. But just because it is a crowded hospital ward, and because Valence Dormer has been working hard there for a twelvemonth, without any rest, it might be a good thing to bring her here—at any rate, for long enough to train some one who could be of use after she is gone. It would be as good as a holiday to her, and it would be a great boon to the village. If I thought such a proposal would fall-in with her own wishes, I would ask her at once to come and stay with me.'

Miss Pentwistle gave a little start. And Sir Merrion Lowater expected home at almost any time. Lady Lowater, certainly, must be taking leave of her senses. But one must not oppose her too violently. My lady was one of those who would carry out a scheme, simply because the undesirability or impossibility of it was flung in her face; when, if she were let alone or gently directed into some other interest, the obnoxious plan might die a natural death. But in this case it must be made to die, if possible. And so she replied, in a tone which did not indicate too much interest, either of one sort or another,

'I am afraid that would scarcely be practicable. You see those hospital nurses are generally under rigid rules, and, if Miss Dormer is on the regular staff, she could only accept your kind invitation by giving up her appointment. It would be a thousand pities for her to do that. Think what opportunities of usefulness she would be relinquishing.'

'As to that, the hospital would be only too glad to have her back whenever she chose to go, that is, if it had any commonsense at all. And the committee ought also to be very glad to put a place like this into the way of training its own nurses. Only think how useful they might be down at the Cove, where invalids are always coming. But that idea of Miss Dormer settling here permanently has not shaped itself into anything yet. I was thinking more how very pleasant it would be to have her in the house for a few weeks. She carries about with her an atmosphere which is more refreshing to me than I can describe.'

Miss Pentwistle shifted her ground now. 'She does. There is, as you say, a wonderful straightforwardness about her. It might just weary you a little by-and-by, but at present I can quite understand how

it carries all before it. But do you think it would be a real kindness to bring her here as a guest?'

'Why not?'

'Well, you see, everything would be so different from her usual surroundings, and the contrast would be so painful when the time came for taking up the old round of duty again. I have my doubts whether it is ever well to introduce an entirely new element into a life which has become habituated to its own routine. You see, now, Miss Dormer is quite content. What she might be when she had once become accustomed to the luxuries of Lowater Court is another matter.'

Miss Pentwistle thought she had put that very nicely. No one could question either the common-sense or the kindliness of it. And over all there was cast the mantle of solicitude for that particular sphere of work to which Miss Dormer had devoted herself. Could even Lady Lowater wish such a work to be interrupted?

Apparently Lady Lowater could.

'I don't think Valence Dormer depends much upon surrounding circumstances,' she replied, rising as if to put an end to the conversation. 'She knows what she has to do, and she does it. She is not one who leans back upon cushions of any sort, more than is necessary.'

'That is because she has such a good constitution,' said unperceptive Miss Pentwistle. 'I always say a strong spine is such a blessing to a woman. But I did not mean that Miss Dormer would feel the absence of easy-chairs in going back to the hospital. I have no doubt they make the nurses comfortable, after a fashion. It is rather the being lifted out of her natural sphere. You see, the people with whom

she has been accustomed to associate—-

'Oh! I understand. You think she is not quite good enough for us, that we are condescending a little. Well, I think just the contrary. I think that a girl who is of as much use in the world as Valence Dormer, confers a favour rather than otherwise upon the idle women, like ourselves, when she gives us the benefit of her clear-sighted activity and cheerfulness. I shall ask it as a great favour of her that she will spend with me what little time she can before taking up her work again at Hurchester. I don't think Mrs. Antony will object.'

'Oh! dear, no, Lady Lowater,' said Miss Pentwistle, with just a touch of spitefulness. Things had gone very 'contrairily' this morning. 'Mrs. Antony will be the very last person in the world to do anything so foolish. She will be far more likely to manage things so that Miss Dormer shall give up her situation at Hurchester altogether, and then she will look to you to provide a permanent home for her; that being the least that could be expected, when you have deprived her of her former means of maintenance. Mrs. Antony object! No, indeed. I am only afraid you may be committing yourself to an indefinitely long visit on the part of the young lady.'

'Never mind. I will do what I feel to be right for Margaret Dyson, and the rest may take care of itself. Now I am going to my afternoon nap.'

And Lady Lowater went away, leaving Miss Pentwistle in a most uncomfortable state of mind.

CHAPTER XXIII.

For of course Mrs. Antony would snatch at the invitation. A far less contriving woman would do that, and not be to blame, either. And, once established at the Court, there was no telling, as Miss Pentwistle had very wisely hinted to Lady Lowater, when Miss Dormer might leave it.

Margaret Dyson might linger on indefinitely. With careful nursing and the comforts supplied from the Court, she probably would do so. One might give her until next winter at the very least. And Sir Merrion was to come home at the beginning of June, say in three weeks' time. Had Lady Lowater thought of that; and was she prepared for everything that might come of the meeting? Apparently she had thought, and was prepared, judging from her openly expressed admiration of Miss Dormer, and the equanimity, not to say satisfaction, with which she spoke of her possible permanent settlement in the neighbourhood.

Now Miss Pentwistle, though not gifted with an intellect above the common lot, had yet a considerable amount of shrewd observation, quickened by having had to take care of herself in other people's houses for the last five-and-twenty years. She was thankful to say that she was not a selfish woman, far from it; but her own rights she knew, and her own rights she would have. There was nothing in the catechism contrary to that. Indeed, it

was a state of things which naturally resulted upon correct and prudent conduct. And beyond these rights was a somewhat hazily defined margin of interests, sometimes wandering, without any proper geographical boundary, into the interests of other people. Her interests, also, Miss Pentwistle looked after in the same manner as she looked after her rights, believing that they belonged to her just as righteously. And if they ran counter to those of other people, why, then the other people must look after themselves. It was a fair rule, so long as people allowed it to work both ways. And Miss Pentwistle generally accompanied it in her own thoughts with the common-sense proverb, Everyone for himself, and God for us all

Also Miss Pentwistle knew that she by no means filled up the measure of Lady Lowater's requirements in the matter of companionship. They 'got on,' as the phrase is, very comfortably together, but there was no more real affinity between them than between so much copper and steel dust which has been shaken up in a bottle together for fifteen years. Let the magnet come, and the steel-dust will straightway gather to it, with no sense of regret at the loss of the copper companionship. Nor perhaps would the copper mourn, unless the change of relationship caused it to be emptied out of the bottle altogether.

Now Miss Pentwistle could not help suspecting that Lady Lowater and Valence Dormer had too much of the nature of magnet and steel about them. Valence was a girl who gave off a certain amount of force and vitality to those who could receive it from her. There was, as Lady Lowater said, an atmosphere about her in

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which some people breathed more freely. and others found it very difficult to get on at all. For herself, she was obliged to confess she belonged to the latter class. In Miss Dormer's presence she could not express herself with comfort. What she said did not seem to be received according to its value. She might almost say that the young lady seemed to shake it off just as one shakes off thistledown, either with indifference or impatience, according as the garment to which it attaches itself happens to be smooth or rough. Sometimes Miss Dormer would listen quietly, that was when the garment was smooth. Sometimes she would coolly pick off and scatter the thistledown away, that was when the garment, or call it temper, if you like—for Miss Dormer had a temper—was rough. But either way it was disposed of, with no sort of respect in the disposition.

Now, with Lady Lowater things were quite different. She never seemed to be in the least degree ruffled or offended by Miss Dormer's independent manner of receiving other people's opinions. Indeed, she rather seemed to like it. It was quite curious to see the interest with which she would listen to the young girl's openly expressed contradiction in matters relating to her own department of work, and indeed to any other, Miss Dormer being a person who had notions of her own about most things. Perhaps Lady Lowater liked it by way of contrast. Possibly she herself, anxious to do her duty, had been too yielding, too ready to give up her own will. She had made it her business, ever since she came to the Court, to avoid discussions and collisions of any kind, and so far she must say she had succeeded admirably, thinking all the while she was doing both herself and her ladyship a service by ignoring topics upon which there might be a difference of opinion. But now she began to think she might have been a better friend to herself at any rate, by a little wholesome contradiction, seeing how very pleasantly it was taken when administered by Miss Dormer.

To see the influence, too, which that girl was beginning to have over a woman generally so cold and uninterested. How she seemed to be drawing out Lady Lowater's affections, how a quite new expression, an almost motherly tenderness, would come sometimes over the hard haughty face when Valence Dormer was near.

Motherly. Ah, that was the point. That brought Miss Pentwistle's thoughts back to a whole brood of unpleasant possibilities.

Sir Merrion, a social, genial, impulsive

young man as everyone knew him to be, home in three weeks' time from a foreign station where young ladies were as scarce as roses in the month of April, thrown into intimate companionship with a piquant girl like Valence Dormer, and not only so, but with a previous acquaintance, made under the most promising conditions, to start from—why, any sensible person might tell what would come of it. A marriage, of course.

And how about the companionship then? Equally of course it would be done away with. For the dowager Lady Lowater would want no one else to keep her company when there was a bright young girl in the house; one, too, who could balance accounts and manage a whole regiment of servants.

Miss Pentwistle folded up her serviette and went into the drawing-room.

Lady Lowater was in the chair asleep. Yes, really asleep, for her hands were still, and there was the quietest smile upon her face, as though pleasant thoughts had been the last to visit her. Could they have been thoughts of Valence Dormer and Merrion?

Miss Pentwistle did not go to sleep at all that afternoon.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.







